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GARRISONING THE EMPIRE: ASPECTS OF THE CONSTRUCTION AND MAINTENANCE OF FORTS ON THE ASSYRIAN FRONTIER

By BRADLEY J. PARKER*

It is clear from the royal correspondence of the Assyrian empire and from the annals of Assyrian kings that the construction of forts was an integral part of the permanent establishment of Assyrian sovereignty in newly conquered regions. Forts served as garrison outposts in formerly hostile areas and were therefore the first footholds of Assyrian expansion into recently annexed territories. They were military centres, from which campaigns and intelligence operations were conducted into and beyond the frontier, administrative centres where the daily affairs of the surrounding areas were directed and monitored, and communications hubs through which news and information were channelled. In addition to these roles, forts or garrison centres also served as conduits through which the Assyrian ideology of imperialism could be diffused into the periphery of the empire and the process of the acculturation of the "foreign" inhabitants of peripheral zones could be conducted.¹

Liverani has suggested that Assyrian military expansion was not a process of conquering contiguous areas, in which a clear line could be drawn between regions under Assyrian control and those that were not. Instead, the process of Assyrian imperialism was one in which "islands" of Assyrian occupation were planted in peripheral zones soon after military incursions.² In regions of Assyrian expansion, "the empire was not a spread of land but a network of communications" between Assyrian strongholds.³ The spaces between the "islands" of this "network empire" were slowly filled in through successive military incursion. Following these conquests new forts or garrison towns were constructed at critical junctures, to protect and fortify the networks connecting the existing Assyrian strongholds, and foreign populations were forcibly settled in the surrounding countryside.⁴ Peripheral regions were not, therefore, brought under the Assyrian yoke solely through swift military action but by the gradual growth and spread of "islands" of occupation into new regions. These "islands" must have initially consisted of forts or fortified settlements such as those referred to in the royal correspondence as *birtu* or HAL.ŠU meaning "fort". This system of planting Assyrian garrisons in newly conquered regions is perhaps best exemplified in Nimrud Letter 48, in which the author speaks of "establishing the foundations (of a fort)" at several junctures in his campaign in the Iranian Zagros.⁵ As the system of Assyrian strongholds became more contiguous across the landscape, the area came more firmly into the grip of the imperial administration and the stage was set for expansion further into the periphery or into regions between these pockets of Assyrian control.

The importance of forts as part of the Assyrian imperial structure is evident from the sheer

*The inspiration for this paper came out of a class in Neo-Assyrian letters that I took at the Center for Assyrian Studies at the University of Helsinki. Much of the translation of the more difficult sections of the text re-edited here, and indeed all my training in Neo-Assyrian, I owe to Professor Simo Parpola, without whose intensive tutoring this article would not have been possible. The up-dated transliteration of the text is also the work of Professor Parpola, and is extracted from the State Archives of Assyria database at the University of Helsinki. I wish to thank Professor David Stronach for his thoughtful comments on this paper and for his continued support in my academic endeavours. I am also grateful to Dr Andrew George for his comments, encouragement and editorial advice, and to Karen Radner for her careful reading and comments.

¹ Forts and the settlements which often grew up around them therefore fit well with Liverani's "centres of ideological diffusion" (Liverani 1979, 299).

² Liverani 1988.

³ Liverani 1988, 86; also consider Postgate 1974a, 237.

⁴ Archaeological data have surfaced in recent years that support this theory. The main obstacle to this is the fact that, although pottery dating to the Iron Age is easily identifiable, the sequence within the Iron Age is little known. However, compare Figs. 5 and 6 in Kühne 1994. The changing settlement patterns are clear if we compare the Middle Assyrian period and the Neo-Assyrian period where, although the chronology covers a wider period, this process of the colonization of some rural areas is even more pronounced (Algaze 1991, 197-9 and Figs. 20 and 22; Wilkinson 1995; Wilkinson and Tucker 1995, 59-60).

⁵ This letter is, however, more important for its reference to Urartu and the relation between Assyria, Urartu and the buffer states between them (Saggs 1958, 200-2).

NL 67

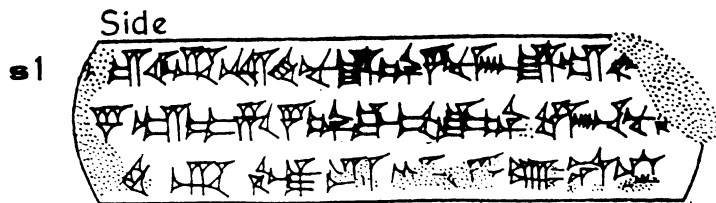
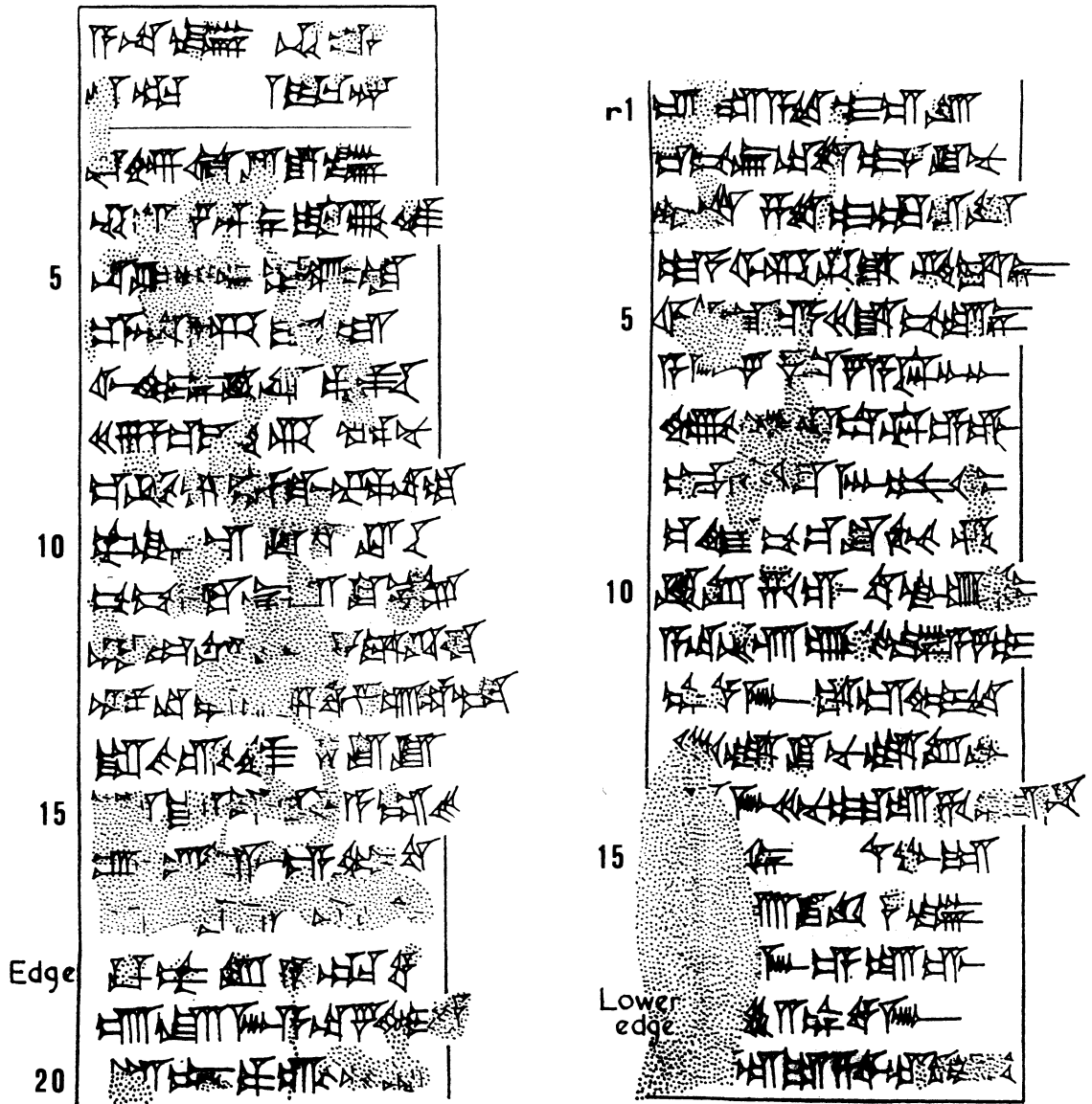


Fig. 1 NL 67 = ND 2666, copy of H. W. F. Saggs.

number of Assyrian letters in which forts are mentioned. In most cases such references are made in the greeting formula that opens letters from provincial officials to the king. It is widely recognized that each region of the empire had a different greeting formula which was specific to that area and can therefore give us some idea as to the priorities and concerns of the Assyrian administrators in different regions. Since these greeting formulas are geographically specific, they can be used to discover the provenance of letters that for one reason or another do not contain concrete information allowing scholars otherwise to identify their origin.⁶ The importance of the system of forts in the northern frontier is highlighted by the fact that the greeting formula from Tušhan, a provincial capital in the upper Tigris south-east of modern Diyarbakir, contains a reference to the well-being of the king's forts: *šulmu ana birāte ana māti ša šarri bēliya*, "the forts and the land of the king my lord are well."⁷

Some letters refer in passing to the administrative and military role of Assyrian forts. Such topics include accounting of supplies and/or equipment in a fort,⁸ appointing soldiers to forts,⁹ warning of military assaults on forts,¹⁰ and even reporting the attack or seizure of Assyrian forts by enemy soldiers.¹¹ The importance of Assyrian outposts in the frontier regions as communication centres is highlighted by the numerous spy letters and reports about Urartu. These letters include references to the movement of enemy soldiers,¹² the involvement of buffer states with Urartu,¹³ and even revolts in enemy provinces, and the operation of enemy spies.¹⁴ The transportation of raw materials procured in frontier regions is a third subject about which there is much information in the royal correspondence. Letters about the acquisition and transportation of logs,¹⁵ and the procurement of horses¹⁶ are common.

Although forts are mentioned frequently in the royal correspondence, these texts rarely give us any idea of the physical structure, the methods of construction, and the administration of these important imperial facilities. Perhaps the only letter that provides detailed descriptions of fort construction and contains direct information about the administration of forts (and the administration of construction projects in general) is Nimrud Letter 67.¹⁷

NL 67 (ND 2666)

Text

- 1 *a-na* LUGAL EN-*ia*
- 2 AR[A]D-*ka* ^mBAD₃-*aš-šur*

- 3 [š]*u-uh dul-lu ša* LUGAL
- 4 EN *iš-[p]ur-an-ni* BAD₃ *ga-mur*
- 5 *na-tu* ^rX X¹ KA₂ E₂-SUHUŠ⁷
- 6 GIŠ.MEŠ ^r*na-ša⁷-ri* [ma]-^r*hi⁷-ši*
- 7 *ši-bir-ni qi-ru pa-áš-šu*
- 8 28 GIŠ.*ma-hi-ri šak-nu*
- 9 GIŠ.IG *ša* KA₂.GAL *šak-na-at*
- 10 *up-pu si-ku-r[u] ep-šu*
- 11 *bi-bi* ^r*ki¹-sa¹-lu¹* *ku-up-ru*
- 12 *ka-ap-ru* ^rX X *šá¹* *da-ri-ki*
- 13 *šak-na-at ú⁷-[r]i* [X] *šá* E₂ *nap-ṭar-^rte¹*

Translation

To the king my lord, your servant
Duri-Aššur.

Regarding the work about which the king my lord wrote me. The defensive wall is finished. The *naṭu* is [. . .]. The wooden *našari*-frames for the gateway of the guest house have been driven in and the *šibiri*'s have been smeared with hot tar. 28 *mahiri*'s have been put in place, the door of the main gate has been installed and the locking mechanism has been made. The drains and the courtyard have been coated with asphalt. The [. . .] container has been set up. The [. . .]

⁶ In some cases the name of the author might be broken or the author might be otherwise unknown.

⁷ This formula is found in the letters from Tušhan and, although less often, in the letters from Amidi dated to the reign of Sargon. For letters from Amidi with this formula see *State Archives of Assyria* (hereafter abbreviated *SAA*) 5 1-3, 6, 11, 14, 15, 17 and 18. For letters from Tušhan which contain this formula see *SAA* 5 21-5, 27-35, 37 and 40. In the Nimrud Letters (hereafter abbreviated NL) this formula appears in NL 29 and 49.

⁸ *SAA* 5 122.

⁹ *SAA* 5 152; also NL 67 re-edited here.

¹⁰ NL 49.

¹¹ *SAA* 5 2.

¹² See for example *SAA* 5 3, 45 (which also mentions forts), 85, 86, 87, 88, 113, 114 and 166, and NL 49.

¹³ *SAA* 5 31.

¹⁴ *SAA* 5 12, 91 and 93. See also NL 29, which was written by the same author as NL 67.

¹⁵ *SAA* 5 3, 8, 127, 129 and 254 for example.

¹⁶ *SAA* 5 64, 82, 133, 202, 218 and 224, among others; see also Fales 1974.

¹⁷ This letter was previously published by Saggs in *Iraq* 25 (1963) 73 ff. (Pl. 12). His copy is reproduced here for convenience and ease of reference (Fig. 1). The only alteration to this illustration is the line numbering, which is changed to accord with the conventions of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project.

- 14 *ra-šip ga-mur ša-lu-lu* of the barracks have been built, finished and
 15 ¹E₂-š[U].²ša x x¹ *a-ra-šip* roofed. The storehouse of the [...] I am
 16 ¹ú-ga-mar¹ *e-bir-tú* building and I shall finish. The baked bricks
 17 ¹x x x x *ki-sa-lu(?)* I am [firing(?). The courtyard(?)]
 e.18 *ku-up-ru a-ka-par¹* I am coating with asphalt.
 19 E₂-šU.2.MEŠ *a-na šá-bir-¹te¹* The storehouses for the garrison troops
 20 ¹[r]a-aš-pa ga-[m]u-r[a] have been built and finished.
 r.1 ¹ú¹-ra-a-te *i-si-ru* They are plastering the roofs,
 2 GIŠ.bi-sa-na-te *i-šá-ku-nu* setting the water tubs(?)
 3 *tar-ba-ša-te i-ka-si-ru* in place and paving the yards.
 4 *ia-ar-hu ša gi-da-ni* The outside water storage cistern is very good.
 5 SI[G₅ a]d-dan-niš *ša bé-ta-ni* As for the inside, the eunuch is going to
 6 A.MEŠ *šá* ¹pat-te¹ *šá* ID₂.HAL.HAL see how to improve the water of
 7 DUG₃.GA ¹LU₂*.SAG¹ *DU-ak e-mar* the canal from the Tigris.
 8 KA₂ ¹x x¹.MEŠ TAG-u-[n]i They are applying the [...]s to the gate.
 9 GIŠ.har-bi GIŠ.šu-gu-ri I am bringing the wooden plough(s), the
 10 *qi-ru ha-mar-tú bu-¹ú¹-[l]um* šugurru's, the liquid bitumen, the
 11 *a-na EN.NUN ú-še-rab a-šá-kan* hamartu and the oxen in to the garrison
 12 LU₂*.ERIM.MEŠ *ša URU.bir-te* complex and I am putting them in place.
 13 *li-li-ku-nu le-ru-bu* The garrison soldiers should come and
 14 [x]x.MEŠ *man-nu i-ma-ta-ha* ¹x x x¹ take up residence. Who will pick up the
 15 [LUGAL] *be-li liš-pu-ra* [...] ? The king my lord should send
 16 [LU₂*.šá]-E₂-ku-din *š[a]* LUGAL instructions. The king's corvée officer
 17 [LU₂*.ERIM[?]].MEŠ *e-ta-mar* has seen the [tro]ops. (There are)
 e.18 [x *lim[?] x me[?]*] 62 LU₂*.ERIM.MEŠ [x thousand, x hundred and] 62 men
 19 [TA* ŠA₃] URU.ra-ša-pi URU.¹x x x¹ [from the] city of Rašappa, the city of [x x x]
 s.1 [U]RU.ar-zu-hi-nu *ša* LU₂*.GAL-nu.MEŠ and the city of Arzūhinu; as for the prefects of
 ša URU.g[u-za-na] Guzana,
 2 *šá* URU.arrap-ha *šá* LU₂*.GAL-KAŠ.LUL Arrapha and the Chief Cupbearer, their soldiers
 LU₂*.ERIM.MEŠ-šu-nu x[x] [are absent(?)].
 3 *hi-ri-šú* ¹E₂-^d15¹ *ú-ra[?]-ak* I am extending the moat(?) of the Ištar chapel.

Grammatical and lexical comments

5. The signs after *naṭu* are possibly ¹GAR[?]-in[?], "is in place" (suggestion courtesy of Simo Parpola).
 6. GIŠ.MEŠ *našarri*: A similar term was noted by Deller and Finkel 1984, 86. It is asserted there that this term could possibly be a derivation of *našru/našru* "hook, peg". Another possibility is that it derives from *našāru* "to protect" and may denote a wooden frame used to keep glued or otherwise moulded objects in place.
 7. Support beams were evidently smeared with bitumen to protect them against the elements.
 10. This line speaks of the locking system of the gate (see further below).
 11. *bi-bi* is from *bī'u*, which CAD translates as a "drainage opening". In this context it surely refers to the entire drain, not just the opening.
 r.2. GIŠ.bi-sa-na-te is from *pisannu*. This word occurs in Neo-Assyrian letters reporting on rainfall, where it appears to be a wooden gutter or trough used to catch (and measure?) rain: see especially SAA 5 274 and 275, also SAA 1 201.
 r.3. The *tar-ba-ša-te*, literally "animal pens" (cf. AHw "Viehburde"), are evidently open spaces distinct from the *ki-sa-lu*, the courtyard whose paving has already been reported a few lines above. Fales (1990, 131) interprets *tarbašu* to mean "corral" based on ADD 404.
 r.5-6. *gi-da-ni*, MA *kidānu*, literally means "outside". It refers to the cistern *ia-ar-hu* and is parallel to *bé-ta-ni* "inside".
 r.8. The undeciphered traces either indicate a particular gate or refer to some kind of bitumen or other substance that was applied to wooden surfaces for preservation and/or strengthening. TAG is a logogram for *lapātu*, a verb of many nuances. The meaning that fits best here is "to smear" or "to paint". The logogram should be rendered in the G present or D present (in this case probably the D present, although without a phonetic complement there is no way to be sure).
 r.9-10. These lines contain a list of equipment and/or commodities that are to be used by the inhabitants of the fort. GIŠ.har-bu is a kind of wooden plough. GIŠ.šu-gu-ri is probably some kind of reed mat, but the word is also used in measurements, perhaps it is a reed mat of a particular size. *qi-ru* is again bitumen but

- usually refers to its liquid (hot) form. The meaning of *ha-mar-tu* is unknown but the context implies that it is some kind of equipment or commodity used in the fort. *qi-ru ha-mar-tu* certainly does not mean “the bitumen is dried up”, as this phrase is translated in the *CAD*. *bu-ú-lum* means “cattle” but here probably refers to the oxen that were used to pull the ploughs mentioned above.
- r.12. LU₂*.ERIM.MEŠ *ša URU.bir-te* literally yields “soldiers of the fort”. My translation “garrison soldiers” assumes that these were the soldiers who were to be assigned to the new facility permanently.
- r.13. The spelling *lil-li-ku-nu* (for expected *lil-li-ku-ni*, ventive) is due to vowel assimilation in which a short syllable following a long, stressed syllable results in change to the colour of the second vowel.
- r.16. [LU₂*.šá]-E₂-*ku-din* has traditionally been translated as “mule-stable attendant” but in fact this official was in charge of keeping track of corvée labourers and retrieving fugitives, especially those who had fled from their corvée obligations (see below).
- e.19-s.2. On the locations of these places see further below. At the end of l. s.2 read possibly z[AH₂.MEŠ] or L[AL-e] (suggestion courtesy of Simo Parpola).

This text was written by a certain Duri-Aššur. This name (which means “Aššur is my wall”) is not particularly common in Assyrian inscriptions. It occurs only fifteen times in the entire State Archives of Assyria database.¹⁸ It is well known that many of the Nimrud Letters are to be dated to the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III, and it is during his reign that the only attestation of this name as an eponym occurs. Duri-Aššur held the office of the eponym as the governor of Tušhan in the year 728 BC,¹⁹ and the same Duri-Aššur was undoubtedly responsible for this text. The greeting formula commonly used by the governor of Tušhan, although not complete in this letter, was also used by the same author in other letters in the Nimrud corpus (see above). Moreover, the geographic, political and economic details contained in the letters by this author fit well the context of the governor of Tušhan and add further support to this attribution.

Since the fort mentioned in this text is said to be situated on the Tigris river, and the text itself was probably written by the governor of Tušhan, it is reasonable to assume that this fort was located within the area under the charge of that governor. Furthermore, since such major Assyrian cities as Tīdu and Sinabu were located to the west of Tušhan,²⁰ the upper Tigris river valley between the Batman river confluence and the area of modern Diyarbakir must already have been relatively secure from the Assyrian point of view. Therefore the fort mentioned in this text must have been located in the Tigris river valley somewhere east of the Tigris-Batman confluence.

The most important feature of the fort was, of course, the defensive wall. It is apparent from the text that this was the first part of the fort to be built. The benefits of this priority of construction are obvious since the construction workers could take refuge behind the wall if necessary, long before the construction of the rest of the fort was complete. Furthermore, the valuable supplies used in the construction (see below) could be stored in the relative safety of the walled compound during the construction. There are many representations of defensive walls in Assyrian reliefs.²¹ Although most of these depict enemy fortresses, it is apparent that defensive walls of this era were usually several metres tall, had protruding towers at regular intervals, and were protected by a slanted rampart or glacis which made it difficult for an enemy to bring battering rams or siege towers close to the wall.²²

The main gate was the most vulnerable part of the wall. The gate was probably made up of two sets of double doors that must have been fairly large, at least big enough to allow a chariot to pass through. The road leading to the gate usually passed in front of one or several of the towers before reaching the gate. This was a defensive measure that allowed the occupants of the fort a chance to view anyone approaching the gate.²³

Two words in this text refer to the locking system of the gate. Ancient Mesopotamian locks appear to have been made of a crossbar inserted through holding fixtures attached to both sides of a double door. Essential to the locking mechanism was a bolt (*sikkuru*), which was fitted into a socket (*uppu*) in one of the holding fixtures and through a hole in the crossbar thus locking it

¹⁸ Seven times in legal documents, once in an economic text, three times in the Nimrud letters (NL 29, 49 and 67), all of which appear to be written by the same person, and four times in eponym texts (all for the year 728 BC).

¹⁹ Millard 1994, 59 and 94.

²⁰ Kessler 1980, 119 and map on 121.

²¹ For examples see *SAA* 4, Figs. 2–5, 12, 15–17, 20–5, 30, 33, 37–9, etc.

²² See especially Gunter 1982, Ussishkin 1982, Yadin 1963.

²³ This was the case for example at Lachish (Ussishkin 1982).

securely in place.²⁴ It is interesting here that the author does not refer to any of the other parts of the door, except those which were the essential components of the locking system. This implies that the author was communicating to the king not only that the walls and the door were finished, but that the locking mechanism was operative, making the perimeter of the structure secure and therefore justifying the request in ll. r.11–12 for the fort personnel to be dispatched (see below).

The statement in l. r.8 which reads “they are applying the [...]s to the gate” is assumed to be a reference to bitumen being applied to the main gate. It is safe to say that this procedure was carried out on most of the important wooden components of the fort. The use of bitumen to seal doors and other wooden objects was probably an effort to protect them against the elements. This procedure was particularly vital in areas of high rainfall such as the mountainous northern and eastern frontiers. Another use of bitumen was revealed by the University of California excavations at Nineveh, which showed that bitumen-soaked reeds were used as a kind of damp-course during the construction of the Halzi Gate.²⁵

There was at least one main courtyard in the fort, probably located just inside the main gate. Not only did it have a drainage system, but the entire courtyard and the drains were sealed with bitumen. In addition to flood prevention these drains may also have been used to funnel rain water into cisterns. The use of bitumen to coat mud bricks may again be an effort to protect buildings against the high levels of rainfall common in the Anatolian highlands, but considering the distance of this construction site from the probable source of bitumen (which must have been at Nimrud),²⁶ the amount used in the construction of this fort is surprising. Although the royal correspondence contains numerous references to raw materials and other commodities being transported from the frontier regions to the Assyrian heartland, this letter confirms that this was not solely a one-way movement. Supplies, construction materials, finished products in the form of military equipment and manufactured goods, as well as engineering skill and technical expertise, were routinely “exported” to Assyrian “islands” in the periphery.

It appears that there were two main living-quarters in the fort. The first, the *bēt ubri* (E₂–SUHUŠ), has been translated here as “guest house”.²⁷ At the time of the composition of this letter the main focus of construction was on this structure and it is here that three very unusual words appear. GIŠ.MEŠ *našarri* apparently denotes a wooden frame used to keep glued or otherwise moulded objects in place (see the comment above on l. 6). This definition would fit well here, where the context calls for some kind of wooden frame that may have been used to hold mud bricks in place. Apparently these frames were driven into the ground as a sort of anchor for mud-brick structures. If this interpretation is correct, the use of support frames and anchors might indicate that the *bēt ubri* was a structure of several storeys. The exact definition of the other two terms, *šibirni* (l. 7), and *mahiri* (l. 8) is unclear. The fact that the *šibirni* “has been smeared with hot tar” implies that this was a permanent part of the structure and may therefore also have been some sort of frame or scaffolding necessary in the construction. There are 28 *mahiri*’s being used in the construction. Since the context indicates that work on the guest house was just getting underway, it is possible that these are surveyor’s pegs used to plot the layout of the structure (or the *šibirni* and *mahiri*’s) before construction. Since this appears to be the last part of the fort to be constructed, one can assume that it was strategically its least essential component. In contrast to the military barracks discussed below, this was probably a much more formal dwelling which, despite its definition as a guest house, may have included the residence of the garrison commander and possibly his high ranking officers. It may also have served to house visiting officials or messengers.

²⁴For a discussion of ancient locking systems and the Akkadian terms associated with them see Scurllock 1988; also Deller 1987 and Kilmer 1977.

²⁵Personal communication of Professor David Stronach.

²⁶See Mallowan 1966, 56, where he states that “just outside one of the eastern gates of the Assyrian town (of Nimrud) there are many pits ancient and modern which gurgitate bitumen ... Assur-nasir-pal II, 883–859 BC, and his successors drew extensively on these wells for the

bitumen which they used for the waterproofing of their palaces and temples.”

²⁷See *SA A* 1 153, r6 and p. 211, glossary s.v. *bēt ubri*; *AHw* 1454 s.v. *wabru(m)*; K. R. Veenhof 1972, 250 on OA *bīt wabrim/ūbrim*. For the reading of the NA logogram SUHUŠ as *ūbrim* see Postgate 1973, 267 f.; for MA *ubru* “foreign delegate” see Postgate 1988, 144 f., followed by Cancik-Hirschbaum 1996, 138.

The second dwelling in the fort is the *bēt-nap̄tarte* (E₂-*nap-tar-te*). This is the residence for the garrison soldiers.²⁸ Lines 18–19 indicate that a storehouse was associated with this structure and that it may have had its own separate courtyard.²⁹ Line r.3 informs us that some sort of yards for livestock (*tarbašāte*) were associated with the barracks. Whether these were corrals for horses or pens for other animals is uncertain, but the former would make more sense in this context. At the risk of being too inventive, the vision that comes to mind when reading this portion of the text is a U-shaped building similar to those that are still common in the Near East today, with sleeping quarters, a kitchen, a dining area and a storehouse surrounding a courtyard with associated corrals or stables for the men's horses. The entire structure was possibly separated from the rest of the compound by a gate which served as a secondary security measure. This and the water system (see below) were probably second in the priority of construction. As we can see from ll. r.12–13, as soon as this structure was complete, but before the rest of the fort was finished, the governor requested that garrison soldiers be dispatched and take up residence.³⁰ This priority of construction, in which the defensive wall was the first component to be built, followed by the water system and the barracks, reflects a hint of anxiety on the part of Duri-Aššur, the author of the text and the governor in charge of overseeing the construction. The reason for this anxiety is understandable since the construction of a fort probably took several months and in the interim the construction site must have made a tempting target for looters or enemy forces.³¹

The fort had an elaborate water system. Lines r.4–5 say that “the outside water storage cistern is very good”. This statement indicates that there was a (probably quite large) cistern or water-storage pool outside the walls of the fort. The next line mentions a canal from the Tigris which was meant to bring water to an inside storage pool. The Assyrian engineers were well aware of siege tactics and would have made provisions for a possible siege of unknown duration. This “canal” was probably a tunnel through which water was diverted from the Tigris somewhere upstream to supply a cistern inside the fort.³² Such a cistern must have been quite deep to make up for the difference in elevation between the river (even if the canal began further up stream) and the level of the fort. The fact that it was necessary to build a canal from the Tigris river indicates that the fort was not far away from the river, but was far enough above the flood plain that a well was not feasible. This might give us some clues as to the nature and function of this fort. At first it might appear odd that this defensive structure was not built on a hill or in the mountains where the terrain would have offered natural defence. The most obvious explanation for the location of this fort so close to the river is that it was intended to protect river traffic. As mentioned above, the transportation of logs was an important aspect of the economic exploitation of this area of the frontier and there are many texts that refer to logs being floated down the river. Furthermore, the Assyrians were essentially a lowland agricultural civilization and were therefore accustomed to building their fortified cities in low flat areas.

Several letters from the reign of Sargon refer to forts which had agricultural land associated with them.³³ One of these letters even speaks of the allocation of fields to fort personnel.³⁴ Lines 9–11 of this text describe various types of equipment being brought into the fort. Among them are agricultural tools, including ploughs, and oxen. This reference reveals that the inhabitants of the fort were expected to produce agricultural goods for their own consumption, possibly even to the point of being self-sufficient. This has several implications. First, it suggests that the imperial administration did not intend the fort personnel to rely on local inhabitants for the procurement of staple goods. Whether this was a security measure or an effort to avoid antagonizing the local populace is impossible to say, but it probably included elements of both. This reference also supports the assumption that the fort was located along the river where agricultural land was

²⁸ Old Babylonian *bīt nap̄tarim* “inn or lodging for strangers”, “house or quarters in which a visitor (*nap̄tarum*) happens to lodge”, recently discussed by R. Westbrook in *JCS* 46 (1994) 41 ff. In this case the term seems to mean “lodging or barracks for soldiers”.

²⁹ The assumption here is that the phrase *ku-up-ru a-ka-par* “I am paving with asphalt” refers to a *ki-sa-lu* “courtyard” in the break in l. 17 (as in ll. 11–12).

³⁰ See Grammatical and lexical comments above.

³¹ See for example *SAA* 1 29, which refers to the impending attack on a fort under construction.

³² Canals that were possibly similar to the one mentioned here have been described by Reade 1978, 61 ff.

³³ *SAA* 5 15 and 109.

³⁴ *SAA* 5 109.

more readily available and implies that the availability of such land was an important factor in the selection of sites upon which to construct forts.³⁵ Although the traditional picture of the Assyrian empire is coloured by the royal inscriptions in which the Assyrians portray themselves as fierce warriors, it is important to remember that the backbone of the Assyrian economy was agricultural production.³⁶ Once forts or garrison towns established the military stability of an area, the process of “Assyrianization” of that area was one of agricultural colonization,³⁷ which included the founding of new rural villages and the settling of people deported from various parts of the empire for the purpose of agricultural production.³⁸ This aspect of Assyrian imperialism is made abundantly clear in the annals of Adad-nārārī II where, after enumerating his many victories while on campaign, he states:

I constructed palaces in the (various) districts of my land. I hitched up ploughs in the (various) districts of my land and (thereby) piled up more grain than ever before.³⁹

The transition from state to empire, at least in the case of the Assyrians, involved the deployment of agricultural society as a mechanism of control and a structure of socio-economic stability. This policy was carried out through initial campaigning by the Assyrian army, followed by the establishment of Assyrian strongholds in the newly conquered regions. These regions were then populated through the mass deportation of hostile or otherwise conquered peoples from other parts of the empire into agricultural land around or between Assyrian strongholds. In moving people to an unfamiliar area which was under the strict military control of this network of Assyrian fortresses and garrisons like the one mentioned in NL 67, and by assigning marginal, or under-utilized, land to these people, the Assyrians imposed a tense political stability on the newly colonized region. The resulting immobility of the agricultural population forced them into the Assyrian socio-economic mould in which they were much more susceptible to, for example, Assyrian census-takers, corvée-officers, taxation and eventually acculturation.

The list of equipment and materials being brought into the fort also includes bitumen. There is one letter that refers to repairs being made on forts and it is conceivable that bitumen was kept in the fort for precisely this reason.⁴⁰ Another possibility, attested in a letter from Babylonia, is that hot bitumen or naphtha was used to repel invaders attempting to breach the walls of the fort.⁴¹ Note that there are two different terms used in this text that are traditionally translated as “bitumen”. From the context where it is serving to seal wooden doors and other important wooden objects it appears that the first term, *qīru*, refers to bitumen in its unadulterated form. The second term, *kupru*, on the other hand, is being used to cover large outdoor areas like courtyards and to seal drains. In this context *kupru* was probably bitumen mixed with gravel or other additives and is therefore translated here as “asphalt”.⁴²

Besides the LU₂*.SAG restored in l. r.7, there is only one other official mentioned in this text: he is the [LU₂*.šá]-E₂-ku-din (Ass. *ša bēt kūdini*). This term literally means “mule-stable attendant”, but in fact this official was in charge of implementing the empire’s system of corvée labour. His duties included retrieving fugitives, who could be common criminals but were more often people who were attempting to dodge their military or labour obligations to the empire. For this reason

³⁵ I have argued elsewhere that archaeological evidence from surveys of the Tigris river in south-eastern Turkey supports the idea that proximity to water and availability of agricultural land were the prime considerations of the Assyrians when founding new settlements in the Cizre plain and in the upper Tigris river valley (Parker 1997). The situation may, however, have been quite different in other parts of the empire, especially in the lowland regions for which see Wilkinson and Tucker 1995, 184–6.

³⁶ Postgate 1979, 197; Grayson 1991a, 213.

³⁷ See Liverani 1988, 88, and Postgate 1974a, 237.

³⁸ Oded 1979, 67–74.

³⁹ Grayson 1991b, 154, text number A.0.99.2, i 120–1.

⁴⁰ SAA 5 199.

⁴¹ Cf. 30 DUG.š[ap¹-pa]-a¹-te¹ ša I₃.GIŠ 18 DUG.šap¹-pa¹-a¹-te ša nap-ī¹ “30 bowls of oil, 18 bowls of naphtha” (ABL

883, 12 ff.) among other items (30 bows, 20,000 arrows, etc., *ibid.* 14 ff.) placed in a fort constructed by the magnates (*ibid.* 6 ff.; ref. and collated readings courtesy of S. Parpola).

⁴² It is significant in this regard that the same radicals, k, p and r, form the root of the verb *kapāru* “to wipe off”, “to smear”, “to rub”. In this letter this term appears in an internal accusative construction with this verb and therefore justifies honing the definition of the verb *kapāru* to include “to coat (with asphalt)”. Note that *qīru* and *kupru* can often appear together in curses and penalties: in MB see Brinkman 1979, 188 f.; in NA see for example SAA 2 6, 490, where Parpola translates “May tar (*qīru*) and pitch (*kupru*) be your food” (note that naphtha also appears in this context). This attestation again emphasizes the similarity yet separateness of these materials.

the term is rendered here as “*corvée-officer*”.⁴³ The existence of fugitives in this part of the empire was particularly common probably because of the apparent leniency of the buffer state of Šubria, the state just north of this frontier region, towards people fleeing the Assyrian authorities.⁴⁴ The sentence in which this official is mentioned reads “the king’s *corvée-officer* has seen the [tro]ops”. This statement is followed by the number of *corvée-labourers* taking part in the project and their city or region of origin. Given the context it is reasonable to assume that the *corvée-officer* was taking account of the people fulfilling their *corvée* obligations and that the sentence should therefore be understood as something like “the king’s *corvée-officer* has seen the men (who are serving their *corvée* duty)”. The system of *corvée* known to have been operative under the Assyrian empire implies a high degree of sophistication and organization.⁴⁵ The *corvée-officers* must have kept careful track of the people in their jurisdiction, presumably by keeping census lists and tallies of time served and time owed. These officers must also have had access to enough military muscle to force people physically to comply. The statement in which the author tells the king exactly how many people were there, where they were from, and which prefectures did not send troops that were expected, echoes the tally undoubtedly taken by the *corvée-officer*. Be that as it may, the imposing structure required for such a system would be very volatile and would certainly result in contention between the bureaucracy and the local population, especially in newly annexed regions. It is significant in this regard that no people from the local area are listed as part of this labour force.

Line e.18 lists the number of men involved in the construction project. The only number that actually survives is 62, the rest of the number being in the break at the beginning of the line. Given the context it hardly seems possible that the crew working on the construction of the fort was only 62 men: even several hundred and 62 is surely not enough. There is enough room in the break to restore *x-lim x-me*, which means that the number could (and perhaps should) be in the thousands.

Following the number is a list of cities that contributed men (in the form of *corvée-labourers*) and prefects from which men were expected but had not arrived. Each prefecture must have had a quota of men they were required to raise for the *corvée* pool. This would explain why the names of the cities of origin are listed for those men who had arrived, but for those who had not, only the prefecture responsible for sending the men is mentioned. It is interesting that these toponyms are widely distributed across the empire: Rašappa is a problematic toponym, being located either in the Jebel Sinjar or at modern Rišafa south of the middle Euphrates,⁴⁶ Arzūhinu is in the lower Zab (possibly Gök Tepe),⁴⁷ Güzāna is modern Tell Halaf in the Habur,⁴⁸ and Arrapha is modern Kirkuk.⁴⁹ The prefecture of the *Rab-šāqê* is the area of the Tūr Abdīn.⁵⁰ These names demonstrate

⁴³ The letter which is key to this translation is *SAA* 5 79 which reads: “The ‘mule-stable attendant’ whom I brought forth in search of the fugitives of the country has brought men from my neighbourhood and given them to me. All the Halziatbareans have run away in great numbers and are (scattered) all over the countries. The ‘mule-stable attendant’ is desperate, saying: ‘I am at an impasse!’ Now Nabū’a, the ‘mule stable attendant’ who was appointed in charge of the Chaldaeans, has brought me 380 persons; a number of them remain in Yasumu and in Bit-Zamani. Let them send him a letter saying how he is to bring forth the Chaldaeans completely, and how he is to assemble the runaway people of the country and bring them to me.”

⁴⁴ For letters referring to fugitives taking refuge in Šubria see for example *SAA* 5 35, in which the king of Šubria refuses to hand over Urartian fugitives to the Assyrians; *SAA* 5 53, regarding a man wanted for murder; and *SAA* 5 54.

⁴⁵ Postgate 1974b.

⁴⁶ The suggestion by Forrer (1920) that this city should be located in the Jebel Sinjar has been widely accepted (Kessler 1980, 142–3 and fn. 453; Oates 1968, 55; Postgate 1974a, 239; Reade 1978b 175–7). Parpola has since reasserted the possible identification of Rašappa with modern Rišafa (Roman Resafa, Biblical Rezepha) south of the

middle Euphrates in Syria (Parpola 1981, 143; 1987, 238 and map). Although the etymology of this name would seem to fit perfectly, arguments were made against this attribution during the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project held in Helsinki in September 1995. The lack of Iron Age remains at modern Rišafa itself would exclude it from being identified with Assyrian Rašappa. This would not eliminate the possibility that the site of Rašappa was located somewhere in the vicinity of modern Rišafa. However, Liverani has recently offered convincing arguments supporting the location of Rašappa in the Jebel Sinjar (1992).

⁴⁷ Forrer (1920, 41) and Speiser (1926–7, 15–17) argued for the location of Arzūhinu south of the Lesser Zab at the double mound of Gök Tepe. Saggs (1958, 209) disputed this identification but the text pivotal to his argument has been interpreted differently by Postgate (1974b, 38). Reade (1978b, 179) reasserted the stance of Forrer and Speiser, which is now widely accepted.

⁴⁸ Forrer 1920, 17, 24, 33, 102, 109; Kessler 1980, 10, 203, 225; Liverani 1992, 44, Fig 19.

⁴⁹ Forrer 1920, 24, 50, 101; Reade 1978b, 179; Liverani 1992, 142–3, Fig. 19.

⁵⁰ Forrer 1920, 107; Kessler 1980, 159–81.

that labour was conscripted from all over the empire for construction projects, and attest to a system in which provincial governors were expected to contribute manpower to corps of construction workers who were then dispatched by the central administration to whichever region of the empire had the most pressing labour needs. A similar phenomenon can be seen in texts referring to the construction of Sargon's new capital at Dur-Šarruken. In the existing correspondence regarding the construction of this city, a total of nineteen governors are known to be authors and another seven are mentioned in the contents of the letters.⁵¹ As one would expect when a king builds a new capital,⁵² the geographical spread of these letters as well as the people and commodities they mention stretch all across the empire. A similar phenomenon must have taken place at the other Assyrian capitals of Nimrud and Nineveh. Mallowan, for example, estimated that the nearly five miles of circuit walls at Nimrud would have been composed of millions of bricks. Estimating that the capacity of one bricklayer was 100 bricks per day, the circuit wall of Nimrud would have taken 100 bricklayers five years to complete.⁵³ What is interesting in this regard is the comparison of the construction of Dur-Šarruken and Calah with the project mentioned in NL 67. There are three city names and three prefecture names from various parts of the empire mentioned in NL 67 as contributing or being expected to contribute what is likely to have been several thousand labourers — a very similar picture, albeit on a smaller scale, to that which we see at the Assyrian capitals. The letter is a testimony to the fact that the type of labour organization known during the construction of Dur-Šarruken, and inferred for Calah and Nineveh, was not an isolated phenomenon.

Nimrud Letter 67 highlights the significance of the construction of forts as a crucial step in the expansion of the Assyrian empire and is just one example of the wealth of information that is contained in the Assyrian royal correspondence.

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⁵¹ Parpola 1995, 51.

⁵² For building activities in royal inscriptions see De Odorico 1995, 16f.

⁵³ Mallowan 1966, 82. This estimate of a bricklayer's daily work-rate is obviously far too conservative.

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