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Observations from the Eponym Lists

The Eponym Lists offer indispensable information for the historian of ancient Assyria, but as ancient documents they also give rise to a variety of observations, not solely chronological.¹

The Function of the Eponym Lists

The Eponym Lists clearly had a different purpose from the Eponym Chronicles. The Lists surely served as ready reckoners for discovering the lapse of time between one eponymate and another, whether recent or long past. While the duration of a debt or the length of ownership of a property may have been the sort of calculation for which the Lists served in daily life, the so-called *Distanzangaben* in royal inscriptions could also be calculated from them.² The unearthing of an old building text during restoration work could lead to the question, How long ago was it deposited? The King List would indicate how many generations had passed, the Eponym List would give the precise number of years. Variation in the coverage of years and in the quality of copying between the manuscripts suggests some were carefully made for "official" or "standard" use (e.g. A1, A2, A7), others were private copies, perhaps for a single series of calculations (e.g. A3, A5).

The system of dating by eponyms demands lists of the names in order. It is like-

ly, therefore, that eponym lists existed wherever there was regular Assyrian scribal activity, from the inception of the eponym system in the Old Assyrian period or even earlier. However, only examples of Neo-Assyrian date survive, and only from Assur, Nineveh and Sultantepe; the towns of Nimrud, Balawat, Tell Halaf, where scribes were just as active, have not yielded any, nor have those sites that have produced only one or two documents, such as Zinjirli and Gezer, although we might assume knowledge of the sequence was equally necessary there.

The system required knowledge of the new year's eponym in adequate time, and the collection of dated texts shows there was little interruption in the sequence from the twelfth month of one year to the first of the next. Within the Neo-Assyrian period there are only six years with *ša arki* dates, that is to say, "year after" the previous eponym, where the sequence was unknown to the scribes for reasons we can only guess at.³ When the name of the next eponym was decided, we may suppose it was entered in a master list kept up-to-date at a central location, perhaps the Aššur temple in Assur. How the information was communicated to the various towns of the empire is unknown. The Catalogue of Eponym-Dated Texts shows that some scribes had slightly different details from others. Thus Aššur-bēlu-ušur (695 BC) is titled *šākin māṭkatmuḫi*

¹ For the texts and discussion see *The Eponyms of the Assyrian Empire 910-612 BC*, State Archives of Assyria Studies, II (1994).

² See the discussion by J. A. Brinkman in *A Political*

History of Post-Kassite Babylonia (Rome, 1968), 83-84.

³ The formula was already in use in Old Assyrian times, see M. T. Larsen, "Unusual Eponymy-Datings from Mari and Assyria," *RA* 68 (1974), 15-24.

on one Sennacherib prism, but *šākin* ^{al}*ša-huppa* on another. Other cases are the post-canonical eponyms Bēl-iqbi who is prefect of ^{ma}*zaman* or *bīt-z[aman]* in texts written in Assur and Nineveh, *šākin* ^{al}*tušhan* in texts from Nimrud, and Šalmu-šarru-iqbi who is *turtān šumēli* and *turtān* ^{ma}*ai*^{ku}*muhi* on tablets written at Nineveh. We can see no reason for these variations, which are, in effect, synonymous, helpful though they are today for historical geography, but they lead us to ask how much liberty scribes were allowed in varying the titles, and if they were given more details than they included in the date-lines. This is a matter of content, separate from the various spellings of names and titles which the Catalogue reveals and which are valuable for linguistic and orthographic research.

The Nature of the Eponym Chronicles

The matter of a continuing record of officials' names leads to the Eponym Chronicles. It is quite clear from the form of entry that the Eponym Chronicles were not primarily lists of the officers in chronological order, for each line begins "in the eponymate of" (*ina līme*); the significant part of the Chronicle was the event which was thus dated and which never appears on the date lines of cuneiform tablets. Since the entries for the events are very brief until the reigns of Sargon and Sennacherib, it is reasonable to suppose they were drawn from a more comprehensive record of various happenings, military, religious and economic. The

longer entries for 704 and 700 indicate that by their correlation with the royal "annals." As the concept of the Eponym Chronicle reaches back at least as far as the time of Shamshi-Adad I at the end of the nineteenth century BC, we could deduce that the Chronicles might have existed throughout the Middle Assyrian period and down to the reign of Shalmaneser III, when our extant texts begin. If the Eponym Chronicles were drawn from a more extensive compilation, the question of the nature of that record arises. Here we may speculate that a kind of diary was maintained at the Assyrian court, noting major events of all sorts in some detail. The Babylonian Chronicle illustrates the idea very well, if we recognize that that is itself only a collection of extracts from a longer original. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Elnathan Weissert has demonstrated some connections between the Babylonian Chronicle and the Eponym Chronicle.⁴ Both that and the Assyrian counterpart were written, we surmise, on waxed writing boards. Textual references for the use of such boards in administration for holding long or continuing lists are clearest for the Middle Assyrian period from Assur,⁵ are perhaps indicated by the term *daltu* in Neo-Assyrian times,⁶ and attested by fragments of wooden examples from Nimrud and one ivory panel from Assur, as well as the famous ivory set of sixteen panels from Nimrud.⁷ The enormous amount of text the Nimrud set is estimated to have contained, at least 7,500 lines, emphasizes the capacity of this writing material, a major lost source of documentation. The Assyrian "annals" and

⁴ E. Weissert, "Interrelated Chronographic Patterns in the Assyrian Eponym Chronicle and the 'Babylonian Chronicle' a Comparative View," in *La Circulation des biens, des personnes et des idées dans le Proche-Orient ancien*, XXXVIII^e RAI (1992), 273-82.

⁵ See J. N. Postgate, "Middle Assyrian tablets: the instruments of bureaucracy," AOF 13 (1986), 10-39, especially 22-25. For writing boards at that date see now D.

Symington, "Late Bronze Age Writing-Boards and their Uses: Textual Evidence from Anatolia and Syria," *Anatolian Studies* 41 (1991), 111-23

⁶ See S. Parpola, "Assyrian Library Records," JNES 42 (1983), 1-29.

⁷ See E. Klengel-Brandt, "Eine Schreibtafel aus Assur," AOF 3 (1975), 169-71; D. J. Wiseman, "Assyrian Writing-Boards," *Iraq* 17 (1955), 3-13.

other royal inscriptions were evidently not composed afresh for each new building or monument. Although it can be argued that some editions depend on earlier ones, as H. Tadmor has indicated (below, p. 330) in certain cases it is easier to assume the existence of an archetype which was constantly extended to include the most recent events. I have argued for the presence of a diary like that in Babylon,⁸ and find the clues from Assyria indicate the same practice. (In parenthesis, we may remark the recent discovery in Egypt of pieces from records of two years in the reign of Amenemes II (c. 1901-1866 BC), giving in considerable detail an account of military and mercantile expeditions to the Levant and prisoners, tribute and trade goods brought back. Nothing like these texts was previously known from the Middle Kingdom.⁹ Campaign records or "war diaries" are attested in the New Kingdom.¹⁰ The recovery of these pieces from an earlier period in Egyptian history is curiously similar to the recovery of the Chronicle of Shamshi-Adad I at Mari.) May we suppose that the fates for the year, set at the New Year Festival (see E. Leichty, above, p. 161), depended upon the record of the previous year, in particular the king's conduct?

Trying to imagine the types of text which may have lain in ancient archives but which are no longer accessible is pushing at the bounds of historical research, and we should go no further.

The Survival of Texts

Nevertheless, scrutiny of the eponym texts

can contribute to thinking about the texts that existed and the texts that survive. All Assyriological research concentrates on the texts a century and a half of exploration has uncovered. There is a constant need to remind ourselves that those texts are, in general, only a small proportion of what was once written, the documents we study are survivors, and mainly accidental survivors. Collating the date-lines on the "Assyrian Deeds and Documents" written between 700 and 648 BC reveals the haphazard element in the survival of these texts plainly. The year 651 has left four "deeds" but eighteen "letters" (oracular inquiries). From many years half a dozen or so "deeds" are known, from some years twelve to fifteen, rising to seventeen (668) and twenty (686). (Twenty-one are given for 650, the eponymate of Bēl-Harran-šadûa, but some may belong to a post-canonical eponym of the same name.) Within the same bracket there are years from which two (691, 689) or a single (662) dated tablets are published. In the case of 691 it is also noteworthy that one tablet is from Balawat, the other is from Assur, there is nothing from Nineveh, a situation which also obtains in 656 and 655 when Nimrud and Assur supply the only specimens and in 662 the solitary text is from Nimrud.

The total number of dated deeds for 700-648 is about 440 (plus 45 letters), whereas the previous half century has yielded only 108. Tablets dated by the forty-two post-canonical eponyms number about 490. Here, again, some years have twenty or so, one year has twenty-seven (eponymate of Sîn-ālik-pāni) and one twenty-nine (Daddî). Also there are several years with only three or four tablets and ten with only one each.

⁸ A. R. Millard, review of A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, JAOS 100 (1980), 364-68.

⁹ H. Altenmüller, A. Moussa, "Die Inschriften Amenemhets II. aus dem Ptah-Tempel von Memphis. Ein Vorbericht," *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 18 (1991), 1-

48; J. Malek, S. Quirke, "Memphis, 1991: Epigraphy," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 78 (1992), 13-18. References courtesy K. A. Kitchen.

¹⁰ A. J. Spalinger, *Aspects of the Military Documents of the Ancient Egyptians* (1982), especially ch. 5.

The temptation to regard some of these single examples of post-canonical eponyms as cases of scribal error or misreading by modern editors has to be balanced by the cases of eponyms in the first half of the century whose names are assured by the Eponym Lists yet are attested by only one or two tablets, as noted already. The great growth in the number of dated documents from the eighth century to the seventh – a time when there are grounds for supposing the use of Aramaic was increasing – may be due in part to the changing occupancy of the sites, with Nineveh accounting for the majority between 700 and 648, about 280. However, that is not the whole story, for there are as many tablets from some years of the late eighth century as from some years of the early seventh: 717 has five, 713 has seven, 710 has eight, equalling several years in the 660s and 650s. Here, surely, the role of accident in the survival of cuneiform tablets becomes apparent. The first point is their physical condition: damage to the edges of tablets can rob us of their dates, so it is impossible to allocate every piece to a specific year, however, in the *Legal Transactions of the Royal Court of Nineveh* edited by Theodore Kwasman and Simo Parpola,¹¹ the majority, 250 of the 350 tablets drawn up between 747 and 660, retain their date-lines. This, however, is not a valid statistic for evaluation as these texts were selected because they did have dates or could be assigned to a specific dossier by other means. There is a considerable number of additional texts to be presented in the second volume of the legal transactions, which, while the dates are not preserved, may very well belong to this period.¹²

Secondly, tabulation of all the dated tablets shows that in the period 750–701 there are three years (750, 714 and 705) when

date-lines are known only from literary or historical texts and for a year as late as 703 BC there are no dated tablets at all. There are many literary tablets from Ashurbanipal's library that do not carry an eponym's name but are datable by the royal colophons or library stamp; consequently, the odd picture results that there are more literary tablets precisely dated in the reigns of Sargon and Sennacherib than Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal (from 718 to 694 there are twenty-four, whereas there are only six between 679 and 650). In 716 we have three "deeds" and five literary tablets, in 713 seven "deeds" and one literary, in 701 one "deed" and four literary. There is no reason at all to suppose that scribes were not working in Nineveh in the years after 700 when no extant tablets were dated there (691, 662, 656, 655), or that literary texts were written exclusively at Assur and Nineveh in 714 and 705, rather we are forced to admit that the texts at our disposal are the result of chance survival.

Thirdly, the enormous increase in tablets dated in the seventh century exemplifies and substantiates another aspect of this phenomenon, that the bulk of the texts survive from the last three or four generations of a period in the life of a town. Going back before 750 BC, the number of dated texts of all kinds is only 90 in the 160 years from the start of the Eponym List, and that number includes duplicate copies of some building inscriptions. As might be expected, there are more tablets from Nimrud than from other sites, although Assur and Tell Billa make some contributions and, while there are some clusters, the texts are in small numbers scattered over the years. Thus the tablets dated about 800 BC from Tell Halaf were all found in one pot, an isolated and chance survivor.¹³ These are

¹¹ State Archives of Assyria VI (1991).

¹² I am indebted to R. Whiting for this information.

¹³ M. von Oppenheim, *Tell Halaf* (London, 1933), 72.

the expected exceptions to the rule, archives overlooked in later clearing activities or texts specially preserved for their importance, such as some of the "Neo-Assyrian Royal Grants" and an occasional literary piece. The rarity of cuneiform tablets from Assyrian sites of the ninth century BC, when the palace reliefs and foundation tablets of Ashurnasirpal and the stelae and monuments of Shalmaneser were engraved with lengthy narratives of royal achievements, is to be explained in this way, rather than by supposing "that this hiatus may be accounted for by an extensive use at the time of wood, wax and perhaps other equally perishable materials to record the normal business transactions of the day,"¹⁴ although Aramaic written with ink was already current in the capital.¹⁵ This observation about the survival of texts can be expanded to cover archaeological remains in general, explaining why relatively little is

available to-day from periods of history when there was no upheaval, when occupation continued uninterrupted, periods when old-fashioned equipment was jettisoned and out-of-date documents were thrown away. We should not expect to discover large amounts of Assyrian pottery from the ninth century, or metal-work from the eighth, unless we excavate a site which was destroyed in one of those centuries, or chance upon undisturbed tombs like those of the royal ladies at Nimrud. Thanks to the existence of texts dated by various systems in Mesopotamia, especially the eponym system, we can establish that this principal, seen in operation in Neo-Assyrian times, applies to all periods, whether there are inscriptions present or not, and has to become a regular part of any assessment of the archaeology and history of an era or a region.

¹⁴ M. E. L. Mallowan, "The Excavations at Nimrud (Kalhu), 1953," *Iraq* 16 (1954), 102.

¹⁵ For letters of the Aramaic alphabet used as fitters'

marks on bricks of Shalmaneser III, see A. R. Millard, "The Graffiti on the Glazed Bricks from Nimrud," *Iraq* 55 (1993) 35-36.