Bronze Age Bureaucracy

This book describes 10 different government archives of cuneiform tablets from Assyria, using them to analyse the social and economic character of the Middle Assyrian state, as well as the roles and practices of writing. The tablets, many of which have not been edited or translated, were excavated at the capital, Aššur, and in the provinces, and they give vivid details that illuminate issues such as offerings to the national shrine, the economy and political role of elite households, palace etiquette and state-run agriculture. This book concentrates particularly on how the Assyrian use of written documentation affected the nature and ethos of government, and compares this to contemporary practices in other palatial administrations at Nuzi, Alalaḫ and Ugarit, and in Greece.

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Writing and the Practice of Government in Assyria

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Preface and Acknowledgements

Conscious that Assyria offers the richest material for the role of writing in government in the Late Bronze Age, though this has remained virtually unknown to historians, my original intention was to do no more than describe the role of written documents in the Middle Assyrian state. However it soon became apparent that such a work would have little meaning without giving readers some background to the society, and, on another level, an account of the principal archives. Hence this book begins by describing the social and economic infrastructure of Assyria at this time, and examining scribal traditions and document types in use. This is followed by an account of the government activities revealed by the selected archives, large parts of which are currently only available in cuneiform copy, and, for comparison, separate studies of the use of written records at Nuzi and other Late Bronze Age neighbours and contemporaries. The result is a fatter book than I had originally planned, but I hope that readers will be able and willing to select the parts most of interest to them.

The book could not have been written without the benefit of a three-year research fellowship, and the assistance of a host of good-natured colleagues. For the Senior Research Fellowship, which ran from September 2009 to the end of September 2012, my sincerest thanks go to the Leverhulme Trust. In this context also I must express my deep gratitude to Nicole Brisch who took up the yoke of my teaching for these three years, and to my other colleagues in Cambridge who bore the burdens imposed by my virtual disappearance with a good grace, most especially Augusta McMahon. At home my heartfelt thanks go to Sarah, and to Alexander, Jessica and Florence, for their patience and support in suffering my absences, whether in 13th-century Assyria or 21st-century Turkey.

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With the provision of illustrations and permission to reproduce them generous help has come from Philip Abrahami, Pierre Amiet, Dominique Charpin, Dominique Collon, Eva von Dassow, Robert Englund, Barbara Feller (in several cases), Helmut Freydank (also several times), Joseph Greene, Stefan Jakob, Hartmut Kühne, Joachim Marzahn, Peter Miglus, Gerfrid Müller, Elizabeth Postgate, Beate Salje, Ursula Seidl, Diana Stein, Piotr Steinkeller, Wilfred van Soldt, Michaela Weszeli and Marguerite Yon (see the List of Illustrations, pp. vi–vii).

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Note on Transcription

The transliterations of cuneiform texts follow the normal conventions used by Assyriologists for Akkadian texts. Akkadian (i.e. Babylonian or Assyrian) words written syllabically are shown in lower-case italics, while logograms are rendered in their conventional Sumerian form in Roman capitals. The standard transcription of Akkadian uses a number of special characters: ḫ for ch as in loch, q for an emphatic k, ṣ for an emphatic s, š for sh as in lash, and ṭ for an emphatic t. In the transcriptions, the lines of text on the original tablet are retained, and the indents often used by the scribes in the first line of text and close to and on the base of the obverse are also indicated. Rulings within the text correspond to rulings on the tablet. Square brackets (and half square brackets) indicate lost or broken signs. In the transcriptions the abbreviations PN, and sometimes PN_1 and PN_2, are used to stand for one or more personal names where it is immaterial which name it represents.

In transcribing personal and geographical names the transliteration conventions of Akkadian are observed, but no attempt is made to indicate vowel length (by using ā, ē, ī or ū) or crasis (by using a circumflex). Ancient Near Eastern personal names are often (but by no means always) mini sentences conveying sentiments expressed at the time of the child's birth. Tiglath-pileser is the biblical form of Tukulti-apil-Ešarra, meaning "My support is the heir of (the temple) Ešarra", while Babu-aḫa-iddina means "(The goddess) Babu gave a brother". Our normal practice is to hyphenate the separate words composing these sentences, and to a limited extent this is also done for Hurrian names, such as Šilwa-Teššup or Hašip-apu, even when the meaning of some of the components is not fully understood. Most personal names in the Middle Assyrian texts are indexed in Saporetti 1970d and updated by Freydank & Saporetti 1979 and subsequently by the indices in MARV 3–10 and other recent publications of texts from outside Assur. A new online corpus combining these with the material from new publications is urgently needed to enable Middle Assyrian studies to make full use of prosopography.