An Assyrian *bīt mardīte* Near Tel Hadid?

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Introduction

The Neo-Assyrian empire established administrative centers at several locations in the Land of Israel following the campaigns of the late eighth century BCE. Indeed, it was the policy of implementing an administrative presence after the military withdrew that ensured the empire's control of this territory between the late eighth century and the middle of the sixth.

Finds at Tel Hadid, west of the Samaria hills, may be identified as the remains of an Assyrian *bīt mardīte*, a roadside provisioning center for Assyrian officials, messengers, and troops. This identification is supported by the agricultural installations at the site, the texts found there, and its location on a major route.

"Assyrian Administrative Center": the Potential for Elaboration

Specific Assyrian administrative centers in the Land of Israel have been identified before. Most of these identifications have been based on pottery of the late Iron Age in combination with architectural features known from other Assyrian sites, and these identifications carry different degrees of certainty. Among these sites are Ayyelet ha-Shahar (near Hazor),[1] Megiddo,[2] Ashdod,[3] Ramat Rahel,[4] Tell Sera' (in the Western Negev),[5] Tell Abu Salima (south of Rafah),[6] Tel Qudadi (north of Tel Aviv),[7] Gezer,[8] and Tell Jemmeh (in the Western Negev).[9] In the

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[1] See R. Reich, "The Persian Building at Ayyelet ha-Shahar: The Assyrian Palace of Hazor?" *IEJ* 25 (1975): 233–37, and R. Kletter and W. Zwickel, "The Assyrian building of Ayyelet ha-Shahar," *ZDPV* 122 (2006): 151–86.

[2] See Baruch Halpern, "Centre and Sentry: Megiddo's Role in Transit, Administration, and Trade," in I. Finkelstein, D. Ussishkin, and B. Halperin, *Megiddo III: The 1992–1996 Seasons*, Monograph Series of the Nadler Institute of Archaeology 18 (Tel Aviv, 2000), 563–69, and, in the same volume, I. Finkelstein and D. Ussishkin, "Archaeological and Historical Conclusions," 602; as well as R. Reich, "Palaces and Residencies in the Iron Age," in *The Architecture of Ancient Israel: From the Prehistoric to the Persian Periods*, ed. A. Kempinski and R. Reich (Jerusalem, 1992), 216–19.

[3] See E. Cogan-Zahavi, "An Assyrian Building North of Tel Ashdod" (in Hebrew), *Kadmoniot* 138 (2005): 87–90.

[4] See R. Reich, "On the Assyrian Presence at Ramat Rahel," *Tel Aviv* 30 (2003): 124–29.

[5] See E. Oren, "Tel Shera" (in Hebrew), in *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, vol. 4, ed. E. Stern (Jerusalem, 1992), 1570–71.

[6] See R. Reich, "The Identification of the Sealed *Karu* of Egypt," *IEJ* 34 (1984): 32–38; Reich, "Palaces and Residencies," 221–22.

[7] See A. Fantalkin and O. Tal, "Re-discovering the Iron Age Fortress at Tell Qudadi in the Context of Neo-Assyrian Imperialist Policies," *PEQ* 141 (2009): 188–206.

[8] See R. Reich and B. Brandl, "Gezer under Assyrian Rule," *PEQ* 117 (1985): 41–54; W. G. Dever, "Solomonic and Assyrian Period 'Palaces' at Gezer," *IEJ* 35 (1985): 217–30; Reich, "Palaces and Residencies," 219–20; T. Ornan, S. Ortiz, and S. Wolff, "A Newly Discovered Neo-Assyrian Seal from Gezer in Context," *IEJ* 63 (2013): 6–25.

[9] See G. Mattingly, "Neo-Assyrian Influence at Tell Jemmeh," *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* 15–16 (1975): 33–49;

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last two cases, textual records provide additional reasons to identify the site as Assyrian. At Gezer, administrative records from the Assyrian period were uncovered, demonstrating the presence of individuals with Mesopotamian names and the practice of recording land sales using Assyrian formulae.[10] And Nadav Na'aman has argued that a toponymic list from Tell Jemmeh demonstrates the re-settlement of exiles from the Iranian highland by the Assyrians at this site.[11]

But none of these studies addresses the function of specific sites within the Assyrian imperial framework. There is a tendency to use the general designation "Assyrian administrative centers" without distinguishing among their different types. Megiddo, for one, is known to have been the seat of an Assyrian governor; but little attention has been devoted to the classification of the other sites.

Such a typology seems an achievable remedy to this desideratum. Administrative records of the Assyrian empire, especially correspondence from administrative personnel addressed to the royal palace, provide a great deal of information about how the Assyrian administration functioned. Based on these letters, it is possible to describe the disposition of the personnel at different sites, and then characterize and classify each one. This functional approach, based on how each site contributed to the operation of the imperial administration, makes it possible to build a typology of those sites for which we have sufficient information. An initial effort at developing such a typology was F. Malbran-Labat's study in which she noted three types of locations, focusing on military installations.[12] First was the *birtu* or *ḫalṣu*, a site where contingents of Assyrian soldiers were stationed, responsible for subduing armed rebellions and for guarding (*maṣṣarti*) the site and its immediate territory. These soldiers were moved around from site to site as needed.[13] The second were provisioning and massing centers, at which soldiers would gather en route to campaigns. The designations of these sites typically began with the element *Dūr-* (i.e., Fort-). Third was the *bīt mardīte*, literally a "distance house," but better translated as a "roadside provisioning center." The term *mardīte* refers to the distance that can be travelled in a single day.[14]

A further elaboration of this typology must remain a long-term goal for scholars, towards which I make a small contribution in the present article. In it, I explore the function of one particular site, east of Tel Hadid, arguing that we can move from designating it as a generic "Assyrian administrative center" to (more specifically) a *bīt mardīte*. As scholars determine the function of each of these "administrative centers," a fully elaborated picture of the Assyrian administrative structure in the Land of Israel will emerge.

The Road Network in the Neo-Assyrian Empire

To understand the interconnected nature of the different administrative centers, it is necessary to understand the nature of the road network; this network is particularly important for understanding the characteristics of a *bīt mardīte*. In Simo Parpola's useful initial summary of the road network, he argued that "its course can largely be reconstructed from numerous references in contemporary documents . . . it was a carefully maintained highway, built specifically for rapid and safe transit traffic."[15] Karlheinz Kessler generally agreed with Parpola's description, but claimed that "the picture presented in SAA I may have been a little bit too positive."[16] While recognizing the textual evidence for a "wider net of such roads," he noted the complete absence of the term *ḫul šarri* (king's highway) in the whole region west of the Euphrates, and he questioned whether all important Assyrian provincial capitals were integrated into it.[17] While a fully

G. van Beek, "Digging up Tell Jemmeh," *Archaeology* 36 (1983): 12–19. R. Reich, "Palaces and Residencies," 220–21; Gus van Beek and David Ben-Shlomo, eds., *The Smithsonian Institution Excavation at Tell Jemmeh, Israel, 1970–1990* (Washington, D.C., 2014).

[10] The most recent publication of the Neo-Assyrian Gezer tablets is in W. Horowitz and T. Oshima, with S. Sanders, *Cuneiform in Canaan: Cuneiform Sources from the Land of Israel in Ancient Times* (Jerusalem, 2006): 55–59.

[11] N. Na'aman, "Population Changes in Palestine following Assyrian Deportations," *Tel Aviv* 20 (1993): 104–24.

[12] F. Malbran-Labat, *L'armée et l'organisation militaire de l'Assyrie d'après les letters des Sargonides trouvées à Ninive* (Geneva, 1982), see esp. 13–40.

[13] See, e.g., ABL 388/SAA XV, 238; ABL 95/SAA I, 95.

[14] L. Levine, "K 4675+ - The Zamua Itinerary," *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 3 (1989): 90.

[15] Simo Parpola, *The Correspodence of Sargon II, Part 1: Letters from Assyria and the West*. SAA I. (Helsinki, 1987), xii–xiv.

[16] Karlheinz Kessler, "Royal Roads and other Questions of the Neo-Assyrian Communications System," *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text-Corpus Project. Helsinki, September 7–11, 1995*, ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting (Helsinki, 1997), 129.

[17] Ibid., 133–34.

integrated system of roads may have remained more of an ideal than a reality in the western portion of the Assyrian empire, the epistolary evidence detailed below makes it very clear that such roads existed and ensured the proper functioning of the empire.

One particular question Kessler raised is of importance to the discussion of the *bīt mardīte*. He questions the idealized picture of "regular daily road stations along the main roads" at which animals could be changed every day at the end of a *mardītu*, or measured stretch of road, and its relation to the *kalliu*-express system.[18] This question was addressed by Louis Levine in his study of a Neo-Assyrian itinerary discussing the area of Zamua in Southern Assyria (near present-day Suleimaniyeh in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq).[19] The journey described in the itinerary "consisted of eleven *mardītu*s and therefore should have taken eleven days. Instead, it took fourteen." This divergeance from the norm was "the anomaly of K 4765+ and is probably the reason for its composition." The author of K4675+ cites the excessive distance between some of the stopping points as the reason that some of the stages took more than a single day. A related point is made in SAA I 97, which mentions the poor state of some of the roads, making travel difficult.[20] But the fact that both of these texts find it necessary to explain difficulties in maintaining regular schedules, and the poor state of some roads, demonstrate that regular and efficient progress from *mardītu* to *mardītu* was, notwithstanding deviations, nevertheless expected of officials and messengers.

Characteristics of a *bīt mardīte*

The name *bīt mardīte* suggests an English posting-house of the 18th century CE, a place where horses could be changed as the hurried traveler continued on. But an important letter from Bel-liqbi (governor of Ṣupite in central Syria) to Sargon II (ABL 414/ SAA I 177) shows that that idea belies the full function of such a center:

Lines 4–7: The Problem

4 *āl Ḫēsa bit mardītija*
5 *nišē ina libbi laššu.*
6 *rab kallê rab raksi*
7 *udīšunu ina libbi lā iḫarridū.*

The town of Hesa, a *bīt mardīte* of mine, has no people in it.[21] The commander of the messengers and the commander of the recruits are there by themselves and do not take care of it.

Lines 8–16: Changing the Population in Hesa

8 *umā anāku 30 bitī*
9 *lušabiša ina libbi laškunu*
10 *ṣabê ša* md*Nabu-ṣalla šaknu*
11 *mar kitkittê issēn*
12 *kiṣir ina libbi āl Ḫēsa*
13 *kammusu lušēṣišunu*
14 *ina libbi āl Argite*
15 *lušēšibšunu eqlē kirê*
16 *liddinašunu*

8–9: I say: Let me collect 30 houses (i.e., families) and settle them in it.
10–16: The soldiers of Nabu-ṣalla the prefect, engineers,[22] being one cohort, gathered inside Hesa; let me expel them. In the city of Argite let me settle them, and give them fields and gardens.

Lines 17–7′: Further Instructions Regarding Control of Hesa

17 *šumma maḫir pan šarri*
18 *egirtu ina muḫḫi* md*Nabû ṣalla*
19 *šakni lišparūni*
20 m*Ia'iru šaniu*
21 *ana rab alanāte*
1′ *ina libbi lapqid*
2′ *u* md*Sin-iddina*
3′ *rab bīti ša* md*Adad-ḫati*
4′ *ina āl Sazana lapqid*
5′ *basi bit mardīate annūte*

[18] Ibid., 134

[19] Levine, "K4675+ - The Zamua Itinerary," 90–92. The text Levine discusses was published as ADD 1096 and also subsequently in F. M. Fales and J. N. Postgate, *Imperial Administrative Records Part II, Provincial and Military Administration*. SAA XI (Helsinki, 1995), no. 14.

[20] This point is discussed by Kessler, "Royal Roads and Other Questions," 130.

[21] He clearly means that Hesa has no people competent to manage the place. In lines 10ff, he admits that Hesa is populated, but by "the wrong lot."

[22] Whether to translate *kitkittû* (a biform of *kiškattû*) as "engineers" or "craftsmen" depends largely on the context. Here, the *kitkittû* are identified as *ṣabê* (soldiers). In a military context, "engineers" seems more likely than "craftsmen."

6′ *iḫarridū šarru*
7′ *ipalluḫū* ^{lú}*arbāya*
8′ *aki ša timāli šašume*
9′ *errubū*

Lines 17–9′: If it should please the king, let him send a letter to Nabu-ṣalla the prefect, and let me appoint Ia'iru the deputy as village chief there, and let me appoint Sin-iddina the house-manager of Adad-ḫatti in Sazana. Thus, they will take care of these *bīt mardīte*. They will serve the king. The Arabs will then go in and out as before.[23]

Clearly, Bel-liqbi tries in this letter to maximize his own degree of control and wrest control of Hesa from Nabu-ṣalla. But he also provides us with important information about how a *bīt mardīte* ought to run. A properly-run *bīt mardīte* does not consist of merely a small group of officials in charge of the messengers or soldiers who pass through the place; a small (if substantial) group of house-holders are required for this task.

The letter describes a projected change in the population of Hesa, a change related to the writer's stated aim of improving the functioning of Hesa as a *bīt mardīte*. Previously, Hesa had been populated by engineers and several overseers, but had not functioned properly as a *bīt mardīte*. Bel-liqbi wanted to re-populate the town with thirty families, under the supervision of a village manager (*rab āli*), and thereby ensure that the *bīt mardīte* of Hesa was properly cared for.

Moreover, Bel-liqbi wanted to move the engineers and overseers presently in Hesa out to Argite. There, in Argite, they would be given fields and gardens. Argite was also a *bīt mardīte,* as line 5′ makes apparent, which speaks of several *bīt mardīte* (using the plural demonstrative pronoun *annūte*). In Argite, the individuals who would manage the *bīt mardīte* were to be given fields and gardens, and develop agriculture to sustain themselves. The families who were to be settled in Hesa would also presumably support themselves solely through agriculture, since it does not appear from the text that they would be supported by the empire.

As part of Bel-liqbi's plan to improve their functioning, one *bīt mardīte* (Hesa) was to be repopulated with families, while Argite was to be repopulated with personnel who had previously served as engineers, but were now being given fields and gardens. Thus, the ideal *bīt mardīte* seems to have been a small settlement of about thirty families, in which individuals loyal to the empire dwelled and supported themselves with fields and gardens. Bel-liqbi seems to have argued that a *bīt mardīte* functioned better when their inhabitants were not active military personnel, but families maintaining themselves through sedentary agriculture.

David Dorsey defined three administrative functions of the *bīt mardīte*: first, to be a community loyal to the Assyrian king (a function which emerges clearly from the letter discussed); second, to pass on official correspondence;[24] and third, to provide lodging, food, and changes of horses for couriers and other officials in the service of the empire.[25]

These functions might best be discharged by sedentary cultivators, rather than by military officials. Sedentary cultivators could grow their own food and use the surpluses to feed couriers and other travel-

[23] The translation is mine. It follows that of Parpola in most respects, and that of David Dorsey, *The Roads and Highways of Ancient Israel* (Baltimore, 1991), 44.

[24] For discussion, see Dorsey, *Roads and Highways,* 45. In connection with royal correspondence, he discusses letter ABL 1021/ SAA X 361, which is poorly preserved, and mentions the *kallê*, or couriers. These were a key element in the efficient functioning of the military and administrative aspects of the empire, and are also discussed by Malbran-Labat, *L'armée et l'organisation militaire de l'Assyrie*, 21–25. *Kallê* literally means "those held back" (referring to the horses held in reserve) but the term is generally used to refer to the couriers. The critical nature of their function is attested in ABL 408/SAA V 227, addressed to Sargon by Šamaš-bel-uṣur (possibly governor of Der), in which the sender responds to the recipient's complaint about the failure of the *kallê* to arrive on time. The sender describes in detail the efforts he has made to have appropriate numbers of stables established along the relevant road, and asks the recipient to place further *kallê* at points along that road. The *kallê* were organized in corps, and in the letter cited and discussed above (ABL 414, SAA I 177), the official is the *rab kallê*, "chief of the messengers." This shows that the *kallê* used the *bīt mardīte,* and that one of its important functions was to provide for them. Based on ABL 434 and 408, the *bīt mardīte* were needed so that the *kallê* could travel in haste. This understanding of the *bīt mardīte* is preferable to J. V. Kinnier Wilson's tentative suggestion that they served "primarily as police posts" (*The Nimrud Wine Lists: A Study of Men and Administration at the Assyrian Capital in the Eighth Century B.C.* [London, 1972], 57). The importance of messengers' speedy travel is further illustrated by ABL 434/ SAA V 138, from the reign of Esarhaddon, in which the king demands that the messengers (*mār šipri*) arrive as quickly as possible (*mā arḫiš*) with enemy deserters.

[25] Dorsey (*Roads and Highways,* 45) formulates this function as "to provide safe lodging for travelers." Based on the documents Malbran-Labat cites in regard to the *kallê*, I have expanded this formulation.

ers, while paid military officials would have to obtain supplies from cultivators.[26] Furthermore, sedentary families would be unlikely to abandon the location. The *bīt mardīte* would have to be maintained through periods of seasonal inactivity (as in the winter, when travel was more difficult and fewer personnel took to the roads) and annual inactivity (as in years when the empire's armies were campaigning in other areas). During periods of inactivity, military officials would only stay in these posts if pay from the central administration were forthcoming. Sedentary families would stay in these posts regardless of such pay. Based on the epistolary evidence, it would be reasonable to define small settlements that were located astride major roads, and that had evidence of sedentary agriculture, as well as close ties with Assyrian administrative officials, as *bīt mardīte*.

Furthermore, the internal political rivalries attested in the letter cited above (ABL 414/SAA I 177) allow for a more precise description of the control of these centers. Although Bel-liqbi was the regional governor, it appears that he was unable to make any changes in the personnel running the *bīt mardīte* on his own. Any changes in personnel had to be specifically authorized by the king. Control of the *bīt mardīte* was not vested in the provincial governor, but in the central administration.

This conclusion is corroborated by a different letter from Bel-duri, the governor of Damascus, to Sargon II (NL 88/SAA I 172). In this letter, Bel-duri reports to the king about a rivalry among several district governors. He reports that other governors are not allowing him to raise food and fodder from the desert villages, as the king ordered, and bemoans the fact that he must care for three *mardiāte*, while the others only care for two. It follows from these letters that the provincial governors could be held responsible for maintaining a *bīt mardīte*. Failure to maintain them was a form of treason, as revealed by lines 19–21 of the Bel-duri letter, in which he expresses his fear that the king will kill him and his acolytes for being ineffective (*lā ēpiššūti*). It follows from this that the central administration saw maintenance of the *bīt mardīte* as a matter of the highest importance. From juxtaposing the two letters, we can conclude that although provincial governors were at times required to supply food and fodder for these sites, the power to appoint managing personnel to the *bīt mardīte* was vested in the central administration, and such persons reported directly to the royal palace. This characterization of how a *bīt mardīte* functioned allows us to consider the evidence from a specific site in the Land of Israel which seems to exhibit many of these characteristics.

[26] The cultivators would have to be forced to provide the supplies, and such compulsion required the involvement of provincial governors, who regularly collected the grain tax. The difficulties of involving the provincial governor in providing for the *bit mardīte* is illustrated in NL 88/SAA I 172, which is discussed below.

The Material Culture of Tel Hadid in Iron III

Tel Hadid is located north of the Shefelah, west of the Samaria hills, on a hill 147 m above sea level, on the south-western side of Wadi Natuf,[27] and is now covered with olive trees. In 1995, exploratory excavations were conducted on the eastern side of the tel, and salvage excavations were conducted two years later, both in preparation for highway construction in the area. On the gentle slopes east of the tel, bounded by a wide terrace, Iron III remains were located in areas designated A and B.[28]

The most famous result of these excavations were the two cuneiform tablets published by Ran Zadok and Na'aman, the first dated to 698 BCE, and the second to 664 BCE.[29] The first text documents a land sale in which someone named Marduk-bela-uṣur bought a field from four men whose names are poorly preserved, but include the elements Attar-, Aya-šebši, and Urad-, the last two of which appear Akkadian.[30] Several of the witnesses have Akkadian names: Šamaš-aḫa-ʾ, Šamaš-zēra-ʾ, and Nādinu. The second tablet involves individuals whose names attest to a more varied ethnic heritage: it is a pledge document which preserves the name of neither lender nor borrower, but the borrower's sister is named *Mu-na-ḫi-ma-a*. The name is similar to that of the Biblical king Menahem and to that of Jewesses from 5th c. BCE Elephantine.[31] This suggests an Israelite or Judean origin for the borrower. One of the witnesses, Šašmāyu, is identified

[27] ITM Coordinates 145448/1152339; UTM coordinates 684300/3538148.

[28] E. Brand, *Exploratory Excavations on the Margins of Tel Hadid: Preliminary Report* (in Hebrew), (Tel Aviv, 1996), 2.

[29] N. Na'aman and R. Zadok, "Assyrian Deportations to the Province of Samerina in the Light of Two Cuneiform Tablets from Tel Hadid," *Tel Aviv* 27 (2000): 159–88.

[30] The element *attar-* appears Aramaic (ibid., 169). On Aya-šebši, see further in Bob Becking, *The Fall of Samaria: An Historical and Archaeological Study* (Leiden, 1992), 113.

[31] Na'aman and Zadok, "Assyrian deportations to the province of Samerina," 170.

in the text as an Egyptian, while two have Akkadian names (Silimu and Ṣilli-Bēl).

The finding of the two documents, both in their archaeological context, makes it very unlikely that they were found at this site by coincidence. It is more than probable that the documents are linked to the nature of the site. The archaeological context in which these documents were found suggests a small settlement which exploited the agricultural potential of the area. The first document was found on the surface among poorly-preserved buildings of partly-hewn stone (area B), in which were found holemouth jars, suggesting a date at the end of the eighth century BCE. Close by was a rectangular collection vat, which appears connected to a winepress or olive press (on the edge of locus A).[32] The second document was found nearby on the plastered floor of what was apparently a three-room house in a poor state of preservation (area A, building 3134). Besides the tablet and late Iron Age pottery, it contained an olive-pressing installation of the screw-and-board type. Near building 3134 and to its west (i.e., closer to the tel), a building of 8–9 metres was uncovered (loci 953, 3053, 3001), oriented east-west, with an entrance in the north side. It was divided into three rooms by two rows of four pillars, with smaller stones completing the wall between the pillars. Based on the pottery found in two pits in the building, it was in use until the sixth century BC.[33] It is important to note that the buildings in both areas A and B are

> unusual in terms of their location on the far reaches of the tel, since this area was used for agriculture and for burial[34] in most of the periods in which the tel was inhabited. Based on the finds in these buildings and the plan of at least one of them (3053), these buildings were used as dwellings.[35]

The documents show an Assyrian administrative presence at the site, as well as the Mesopotamian origins of the contracting parties in each case (the purchaser and lender respectively). The ability to write such documents also attests to the presence of a professional scribe. Furthermore, the decision to write these documents in cumbersome cuneiform attests to the expectation that an administrator with enforcement powers required legal documents to be written in it. This decision shows two further points: first, that the purchaser and lender were of Mesopotamian origin and did not attempt to assimilate culturally with the local population, even in 664 BC, at least a generation after their initial settlement in Tel Hadid (dated by Zadok and Na'aman to c. 708 BC);[36] and second, that they were politically and juridically dependant on the Assyrian central administration.

Zadok and Na'aman lean towards explaining the use of cuneiform as a function of the origins of the lender and seller as deportees from Babylonia:

> It seems to us that the Mesopotamian tradition of cuneiform writing was kept only by people who had been deported from the Babylonian main urban centers and, to some extent, also by officials of the Assyrian administrative apparatus. These deportees arrived from the ancient and most respected centers of learning and culture of Mesopotamia and being proud of their origin kept the cultural tradition of their ancestors.[37]

This is certainly reasonable, but it is also important to emphasize the functional purpose of these documents: they were designed to allow an administrative official of some sort to enforce the transaction. Were these documents literary compositions, a desire to express cultural origins might be an adequate explanation of the medium in which they were composed. But these are functional documents, and the choice of medium must be related to the medium used by the administration which possessed the power to enforce their terms. Although the provincial administrations of the region west of the Euphrates, including most of Syro-Palestine, may have corresponded largely in Aramaic,[38] there is evidence that the Assyrian central administration in the time of Sargon demanded correspondence in Akkadian (SAA XVII, 2).

The best explanation for the decision to write these documents in cuneiform is that the site was under the direct control of the Assyrian central administration, rather than the provincial governorate. The documents "display the same formulary and scribal conventions"

[32] Brand, *Exploratory Excavations*, 3.

[33] E. Brand, *Salvage Excavations on the Margins of Tel Hadid: Preliminary Report* (in Hebrew), (Tel Aviv, 1998), 27–28.

[34] On Iron II burial caves near Tel Hadid, see Eli Yannai, "A Burial Cave from the Iron Age II and from the Early Roman Period North of Tel Hadid" (in Hebrew), *Atiqot* 70 (2012): 1–20.

[35] E. Brand, *Salvage Excavations*, 28, my translation.

[36] Na'aman and Zadok, "Assyrian Deportations to the Province of Samerina," 178.

[37] Ibid., 180.

[38] Ibid.

as those from the Assyrian heartland.[39] The use of these conventions, including the use of Assyrian *limmu* years, strongly suggests juridical dependence on the Assyrian central administration and its procedures.

The small size of the site and the nature of the texts do not suggest a major administrative center, and partly for this reason Zadok and Na'aman identified it as one of several sites inhabited by exiles deported from Babylonia. However, I believe that we can be more precise in determining the nature of the site. The dependence of the lender and seller on the Assyrian central administration is detailed above. But the purchase of fields suggests that these were not administrators temporarily ensconced in a billet, but individuals who worked the land and intended to remain on it. Who were these tillers of the soil who continued to rely on the Assyrian central administration?

It seems unlikely that most of the deportees brought by the Assyrians to the Land of Israel would remain reliant on the Assyrian administration. It would not have served the empire to create colonists who were economically reliant on it. On the contrary, all of the available evidence suggests that the empire took pains to ensure that the deportees brought to Samaria would be economically productive, and produce surpluses that could be taxed.[40] The continued reliance of the Tel Hadid deportees on the imperial administration thus correlates well with what we know of *bīt mardīte*. As discussed above, the personnel of these sites reported directly to and relied on the Assyrian central administration, due to the importance of the road and courier system to the central administration.

Zadok and Na'aman assume that the writers of the documents found near Tel Hadid were deportees, while I have argued that they were families who engaged in agriculture and staffed a *bit mardīte*. The two points are by no means mutually exclusive. As K. Lawson Younger has shown in relation to the deportation of Israelites to Halah and Gozan, deportees were not all sent to suffer hardship; many were settled on lands owned by high state officials, or on temple lands, where tillers of the soil were needed.[41] It appears that the area near Tel Hadid was considered by the Assyrian central administration to be an area where such cultivators were needed. The most reasonable justification for placing deportees from Mesopotamia in this area was the need to maintain a *bit mardīte* for the use of Assyrian officials and troops travelling along the north-south road.

Unusual Features in Settlements Near Tel Hadid

The importance of this road to the Assyrian administration correlates to the unique settlement patterns in the area north and northeast of Tel Hadid. This section west of Samaria is the one region we know to have been newly-settled after the Assyrian conquests. A series of farmsteads were established in this period in a region which was, according to Avraham Faust, "not the most suitable for habitation and which was unoccupied for most of its history."[42] These farmsteads continued to be inhabited through the end of the Persian period, and in many cases through the end of the Hellenistic period. What was the reason for establishing these settlements specifically in the neo-Assyrian period?

Most of these sites are located in a line due north of Tel Hadid. While the chalky composition of this area west of Samaria made it historically less agriculturally productive than the hill country, the area was always very important for transportation. The main north-south road had to run between the hill country to the east and the swampy land along the coast to the west, and therefore through this area. In most periods, the main road ran 2–10 km west of this line of sites, passing through Ono and Aphek, before running north to Socoh and Yaham (as in the topographical list of Thutmose III, nos. 64–68).[43] The line of farmsteads

[39] Ibid., 163

[40] The tribes Sargon brought from Arabia to settle Samaria, for instance, were probably brought to that area to divert to Samaria some of the trade of the Arabian peninsula (K. Lawson Younger, "The Deportations of the Israelites," *JBL* 117 [1998]: 227), and thus the Arabian tribes would be economically self-sufficient. Furthermore, letters sent to Sargon II show that deportees were to be provided with the means to be economically productive. A letter which mentions the city of Samaria reports that the sender has ordered the inhabitants to construct wells in the region, presumably so as to engage in irrigation agriculture (K 13005, CT 53 458/ SAA I 255). A famous letter written by Bel-liqbi emphasizes that, while he restricted the sale of iron to the Arabs near Ṣupite east of the Orontes valley, he did sell it to the deportees in that region (SAA I 179), presumably so that they could exploit economic opportunities.

[41] Younger, "The Deportations of the Israelites," 222.

[42] Avraham Faust, "Farmsteads in the Foothills of Western Samaria: A Re-examination," in *"I Will Speak the Riddles of Ancient Times": Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. A. M. Maier and P. de Miroschedji (Winona Lake, IN, 2006), 493.

[43] Published in A. F. Rainey and Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World* (Jerusalem, 2006), 73.

from the Assyrian period was interpreted by Dorsey as an eastern alternate route of this main road.[44] The path he delineated, from the western edge of the Sharon plain southwards towards Gezer, ran along the western edge of the highlands of Samaria. More importantly, it formed a more direct route to Gezer for those travelling southward along the main coastal route, and did not appreciably lengthen the distance to Ashdod and Egypt. These were important destinations for imperial officials, both civilian and military, in the late eighth century and first half of the seventh.[45] At Gezer, the architectural features suggest that an Assyrian official was in residence there,[46] and the deeds from Gezer show an Assyrian presence in the seventh century. The road which passed Gezer en route to Ashdod and Egypt would therefore have been a logical one for Assyrian officials, messengers, and troops to use during the late eighth and first half of the seventh centuries.

A *bīt mardīte* near Tel Hadid

The settlement near Tel Hadid was relatively small, but the cuneiform documents found at that site show the Mesopotamian origin of its inhabitants and their reliance on the Assyrian imperial administration. This was a new settlement, the houses of which were built in areas previously used for agriculture and burial. While the collection vats and olive press at the site cannot be dated with certainty, it is reasonable that the new inhabitants of the late eighth and seventh centuries engaged in agricultural activity. The site is part of a row of settlements (mostly farmsteads) established in the late Iron Age, along the road used by Assyrian officials, troops, and messengers.

It seems most reasonable to draw an analogy between Tel Hadid and Hesa, the site on the Hamath-Damascus road at which Bel-liqbi sought to establish a small settlement that would serve as a *bīt mardīte*. Both Hamath and Damascus were areas of military operations early in the reign of Sargon II, and communication between them would have been of great importance to the empire. Similarly, Tel Hadid was on a direct route to Gezer, which housed Assyrian officials and controlled the fertile grain lands of the Ayalon valley, and thence to Ashdod, which was also a center of insurrection in the time of Sargon II. In order to provide for the officials, troops, and messengers travelling along the road leading north from Gezer, deportees were settled along it during Sargon's reign. In some places, individual farmsteads were established. In others, notably near Tel Hadid, it seems that small groups of deportees were settled. They were probably given fields and gardens, as in Bel-liqbi's plan for Hesa and Argite, and were expected to develop agricultural holdings. At all of these sites, the new settlers were responsible for providing amenities for those engaged in imperial business travelling along the road.[47]

The status of the site near Tel Hadid as a *bīt mardīte* can also help explain the tendency to write in cuneiform, even if the provincial administration operated in Aramaic. As discussed above, *bīt mardiāte* were not directly controlled by the provincial governors, but were rather under the control of the central administration. These posts provided services to the central administration, and the personnel in them were directly linked to it. Thus, both the cuneiform character of the documents found at the site, the formulae they use, and the use of Assyrian *limmu*-years in dating them are consistent with what we would expect in an Assyrian *bīt mardīte*.

Postscript

Identifying the function of this particular site has implications for understanding the dissemination of Assyrian claims of empire in Judah in the late eighth century. Previously, I argued that such claims were disseminated in the land of Israel by the officials resident at the Assyrian administrative centers, such as Tel Hadid, from which places such claims would easily have reached Jerusalem.[48] If the Assyrian presence at Tel Hadid was dynamic, with a steady flow of officials, troops, and messengers passing through the site, information from the center of the empire would have reached this site easily and quickly. This means that the "lag time" between the promulgation of new messages by the empire, and their reaching Jerusalem, could be counted in weeks or months, rather than years.

[44] Dorsey, *Roads and Highways of Ancient Israel*, 65–66.

[45] Ashdod was the destination of repeated campaigns in the time of Sargon II, and Egypt was the destination of campaigns of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal.

[46] Reich and Brandl, "Gezer under Assyrian Rule."

[47] If the agricultural installations for processing surpluses can be dated to the seventh century, they are entirely consistent with what we would expect in a *bīt mardīte* which was responsible for providing for travelers.

[48] Shawn Zelig Aster, "Transmission of Neo-Assyrian Claims of Empire to Judah in the Late Eighth Century BCE," *HUCA* 78 (2007): 36.