CHAPTER FIVE

WORK, FLIGHT, ORIGINS, AND STATUS

Introduction

The documents available for use in this study were produced for Nippur administrators to keep track of the size, physical condition, whereabouts, and supply needs of the servile population. Taken as a whole, these texts are probably the largest concentrated body of material by subject matter from the Kassite levels of the site, comprising roughly 5% of its excavated Middle Babylonian tablets.¹ There is little doubt that the management of this population was a significant concern of the political administration at Nippur.

Although this textual documentation is abundant, the information it conveys is limited. The texts were composed for practical purposes and tend to be terse and formulaic, presuming basic knowledge of how the large-scale labor and supply system functioned and affording only momentary glimpses into its inner workings. Trying to reconstruct a fuller picture of the system inevitably involves much extrapolation based on minor details incidental to the documentation itself, with all the uncertainties that such a process entails. Much of this reconstruction may be recast as further research is undertaken.

Nonetheless it is important that a start be made in trying to recover the milieu in which the servile population lived and worked. Earlier chapters have dealt with the demography of the laboring population and with its family and household structure. Now we will begin to place the laborers in a broader context within their political and

¹ I.e., approximately 600 of the 12,000 MB tablets from Nippur. For the total number of MB texts from the site, see J.A. Brinkman, “The Monarchy in the Time of the Kassite Dynasty,” in Le Palais et la royauté, XIXe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, ed. Paul Garelli (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1974): 395. To date, less than 15% of the officially excavated Kassite period tablets from Nippur have been published (J. A. Brinkman, “Administration and Society in Kassite Babylonia,” JAOS 124 (2004): 288). The number of documents identified as relevant to the servile population at Nippur is expected to grow as ongoing prosopographical studies progress.
socio-economic world. Succeeding sections of this chapter will deal with what little is known about the organization of the laboring pool (section 2), the tasks and occupations of the workers (section 3), their administration and supervision (section 4), the problem of flight and diminution of the work force (section 5), the origins and civil status of the workers (section 6), and conclusions (section 7).

Organization of the Servile Labor Pool

In trying to reconstruct how the Nippur administration organized the servile population into an effective labor pool, we start by analyzing the groups and subgroups of laborers listed in the texts, especially in the rosters of various types. First, it must be observed that there seem to have been no clear-cut general principles according to which members of the population were grouped or posted. As laborers, they could be assigned in a set or singly to a place (generally suburbs or villages near Nippur),\(^2\) to a large institution (particularly a religious organization),\(^3\) to a household,\(^4\) or to a private individual.\(^5\) In some texts, no place, institution, or person is mentioned as responsible for the laborers; and such tablets are presumably internal memoranda (with the posting unexpressed). A few texts may list all their workers as connected with a single occupation or with related occupations rather than as assigned to a posting; for example, there are texts concerned exclusively with distinctive classifications such as

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\(^2\) E.g., Dunni-ahi (BE 14 62), Tukulti-Enlil (CBS 3465).

\(^3\) A temple (such as the temple of Ninlil, e.g., PBS 2/2 11, MUN 89) or a religious functionary (such as a NIN.DINGIR (=ugbaktu or ēntu), e.g. Ni. 943,) or the šatammu of a temple (e.g., CBS 7726 rev. 5–6).

\(^4\) E.g., CBS 3646 rev. i’ 5. It can be difficult to determine whether these references refer to the posting of a laborer (“[assigned to the] house/estate of PN,” i.e. workers not related to PN) or to the kin-group of a laborer (“[these are kinsmen belonging to] the House of PN”). Similarly, another expression, DUMU.MEŠ PN, “sons of PN,” occasionally appears in qualitative summaries or entry labels, raising the same issues. Is it a reference to the previously listed workers (a group of related persons performing a common work obligation (without further specification as to whether they were part of a nuclear or extended family, brothers with independent households, or remoter descendants of one man)) or to their supervisors (“[assigned to] the sons of PN”)?

\(^5\) E.g., UM 29-16-108 (heading: a-mi-lu-tum ša i-tu “PN”). For other examples of servile workers assigned to individuals, see the discussion of “Recapture and Reassignment” documents on pages 115–18.