CHAPTER 2

Tablets and Archives

Introduction

The arguments about what it meant to own a settlement at Old Babylonian Alalah advanced in this book derive from the study of the cuneiform tablets excavated at that city. Before beginning the arguments in earnest, then, I want: (1) to delineate and describe the corpus of tablets as clearly as possible; (2) to articulate the archival framework within which I will approach them; and (3) to determine the chronological distribution of the tablets.

The first pair of tasks is important for a number of reasons. Defining and describing the corpus emphasizes the genres of texts that are extant, which in turn suggests the types of questions that may be asked of the corpus with profit. The act conveys a sense of the corpus's density, which is a crucial limiting factor for how detailed one’s analysis can be. Defining the corpus also makes it possible for the reader to determine which texts I have not used in my analysis, for of course the texts that are omitted can affect the shape of the conclusions I reach as much as the texts that are included. (To this end, Appendix 2 provides both a detailed summary of the Level VII documentation relating to settlements and other immovable property as well as a list of all of the published and unpublished Level VII tablets and envelopes known to me.) Finally, defining and describing the corpus underscores the genres of texts that are absent from it. Not only does such insight aid our comprehension of the processes of preservation and excavation that led to the recovery of this particular corpus, but also it represents the first crucial step towards reconstructing the processes by which we understand the Level VII texts to have been written, stored, and discarded (or not).

Such reconstruction, which is what I mean by the phrase “articulating an archival framework,” is important at a most basic level because it allows one to perceive the additional functions that texts gain upon being stored. For example, at the time of its writing, a contract for the purchase of immovable property had the immediate function of recording the lawful acquisition of that property; upon its storage, the contract gained the additional function of confirming the new owner’s title to the property. Still further functions are perceptible when one is able to appreciate that certain texts were stored together as dossiers (on which term, see below). For instance, consider a contract recording a father’s purchase of a house that was stored together with a testament in
which he bequeaths the property to his son. Individually, the texts function to confirm, on the one hand, the first generation's lawful purchase and title, and on the other hand, the second generation's lawful acquisition and title. When taken together, the two texts confirm the second generation's title to property that had been lawfully acquired in the first place.

However, approaching the corpus from within an archival framework is also important because it enables one to analyze the chronological distribution of tablets within that corpus. Because archival processes have determined the morphology of the Level VII corpus as much as physical processes (such as the destruction of the Level VII palace or its modern excavation), situating a text within an archival framework can provide an indication of its date relative to the corpus as a whole. Such indications can allow one to appreciate in a rough manner the chronological distribution of the entire corpus of Level VII texts, dated and undated texts alike. This distribution, in turn, allows one to reconstruct sequences of transactions concerning particular properties—a method that I will pursue in Chapter 3.

The Corpus of Level VII Tablets

We will probably never know how many Level VII cuneiform tablets Woolley excavated at Alalah. Neither Woolley nor Wiseman, who produced the first edition of many of the tablets, provided a complete count. Shortly after the first edition appeared, Wiseman published a few additional texts, stating “[w]ith the present publication, all the Alalah tablets are now available in copy, with the exception of the longer lists of personal names and some of the more damaged fragments” (1954: 1), elaborating in a note that “[o]ne final tablet (*456) is still under treatment. With this exception all the tablets found at Alalah have now been published at least in catalogue form” (p. 1 n. 3). Yet two pages later, Wiseman remarked on finding an important seal impression “[a]mong the small fragments of tablets, rejected as not worth publication and being checked before their return to the Antakya Museum” (1954: 3).

In fact, Wiseman returned hundreds of tablet and envelope fragments to Turkey without publishing any description or count of what was sent back. Manfried Dietrich and Oswald Loretz, who copied and photographed Alalah texts in the Hatay Archaeological Museum in the spring of 1965 and 1966,