A study of Assyrian intelligence techniques, networks and their development over the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E. provides a new perspective on Sennacherib’s reign and the events of 701 B.C.E. We might ask how a structural analysis on this topic casts new light on Sennacherib; the contributions are two. First, through it, we can reconstruct the king’s career as an intelligence officer. This was no sinecure or brief stop on the *cursus honorum* for Assyrian crown princes: Sennacherib was the first heir-apparent to have substantial training in this area of statecraft, and the experience informed much of his reign. Sennacherib’s tenure on the throne was characterized as much by geo-political strategic concerns as by military campaigning in the mould of the conquest kings who came before him. Nor was this a purely personal or characterological aspect of Sennacherib the man; the shift was part of the zeitgeist of the final phase of high empire, in which Assyria was increasingly concerned with the control of territory, for which information was crucial, rather than with its acquisition by force. Second, the precepts and procedures perfected by the end of the eighth century B.C.E. tell us much about the Levantine campaign itself, in particular what Sennacherib had to know before he set out for the campaign, the sources through which he might have obtained needed information, and how he exploited it in the field. To properly appreciate these points, we must begin with a tour through the subject of Neo-Assyrian intelligence—its terminologies (II), operations (III), and historical development (IV)—before returning to focus on Sennacherib’s career and the fateful campaign on 701 B.C.E. (V).

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1 Readers may also wish to consult my earlier work on this subject, *Hezekiah and the Assyrian Spies: Reconstruction of the Neo-Assyrian Intelligence Services and its Significance for 2 Kings 18–19* (Rome, 2006); the analysis here builds on that book in new and different ways.
Intelligence services are often associated with undercover infiltrators and murky ways of obtaining top-secret information. Seeing the variety of topics contained in the Assyrian letters, one could rightly ask how an internal communication or a purely administrative exchange constitutes an intelligence report. Yet were we to thumb through the files of modern intelligence agencies, we would be impressed by the amount of unsensational data. Intelligence services have always been interested in a vast spectrum of information:

> Just about any fact can be of great importance, or no importance, depending on the use to which the recipient puts it. What is useless to one customer will be precious to another who has insight and the will to use it.²

From this perspective, Neo-Assyrian documents contain what a modern intelligence officer would call static facts (e.g., information on geography, climate, cultural and religious institutions), dynamic facts (e.g., tactical situations, current allegiances, plotting of revolts, religious feasts), and technical facts (e.g., the equipment of garrisons, location of bridges). Thus the question is not what kind of information was gathered, but how important this information was for a given ruling body. From the strategic and political importance of these letters, we can conclude that many of them would qualify as intelligence reports.

However, if intelligence, however important it might have been, was gathered only occasionally, we cannot speak about intelligence services but rather about occasional intelligence activities. A. Leo Oppenheim has convincingly argued the contrary.³ His study was based on the brilliant intuition of René Follet who, in analyzing Neo-Assyrian letters, concluded that the Assyrians established a deuxième bureau headed by the crown prince.⁴ Follet’s understanding of intelligence was strongly marked by the western notion of intelligence agencies operating in democratic societies.⁵ Any comparison with modern intelligence agencies naturally is problematic, since the Neo-Assyrian Empire was not a modern, integrated socio-political nation-state. Consequently, the nature of modern agencies and the ancient intelligence services display some substantial differences.

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