The Assyrian royal inscriptions present an ideal picture of the activities of the king and his magnates: without fail, they overcome obstacles, resolve conflicts, and act perfectly and morally. These records reflect a highly organized realm: the king always leads the army to victory and success, and his officials are diligent, resolute and obedient. This is the image of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and army, not only in the Assyrian royal inscriptions but in the Bible too: the prophet Isaiah describes the Assyrian army thus (Isa 5:26–29):

There it comes with lightning speed!  
In its ranks, none is weary or stumbles,  
They never sleep or slumber;  
The belts on their waists do not come loose,  
Nor do the thongs of their sandals break.  
Their arrows are sharpened,  
All their bows are drawn.  
Their horses’ hoofs are like flint,  
Their chariot wheels like the whirlwind.  
Their roaring is like a lion’s,  
They roar like the great beasts;  
When they growl and seize a prey,  
They carry it off and none can recover it.

The picture presented by the Neo-Assyrian letters is quite different; these records indicate disorder, disobedience and corruption in the Assyrian army, temples and provinces, theft of royal and temple property, unjust confiscation of private property, enslavement of widows, poor administration, acceptance and payment of bribes, appropriation of land and people, inefficiency, covering up thefts committed by subordinates, false reports, desertion from the army, and more.
Are these cases just exceptions, rare failures of the system, typical of peripheral areas or transitional periods, and not indicative of the typical behavior of most Assyrian officials? Or are they real reflections of the profile of the Assyrian officials, not as the kings would wish to shape their mode of behavior, or as they desired to present themselves, but as they truly were?

The discussion below focuses only on the feature of land appropriation by Assyrian officials.¹ This question has come up for discussion various times in a few notes and articles, but no detailed study on the subject as a whole has hitherto been conducted in previous literature.²

The article examines in chronological order 14 cases of land appropriation by Assyrian officials in the 8th–7th centuries, mainly from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III to the reign of Assurbanipal (see table). These 14 cases are not all the examples known to date, but they are undoubtedly the most obvious ones. Other possible cases are mentioned briefly in the notes.³

1. *CTN V, pp. 208–211 = ND 2734+ = NL 41*

This letter was sent to the king by Nergal-uballiṭ, governor of Arzûhina, and the eponym official for 731 B.C.E.⁴ It is undated, but it was probably composed in the reign of Tiglath-pileser III since

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¹ This article is based on a paper presented at the 6th Conference of the Israel Society for Assyriology and Ancient Near Eastern Studies (ISAANES) in Jerusalem in 2003.
³ It is a great pleasure to present this article to Bustenay Oded, my teacher, colleague and dear friend, on the occasion of his 75th birthday.