Neo-Assyrian Deportation and the Levant
By Jonathan Valk

At the height of its power in the 8th and 7th centuries BCE, the Neo-Assyrian state could truly call itself a universal empire. It exercised hegemony throughout the Near East, bound only by the open seas, the Taurus and Zagros mountains, and the great Arabian desert. But where did the Assyrian state find the people it needed to man its armies, build its monuments, develop its infrastructure, and produce the necessary supplies to make it all possible?

Map of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. (https://blog.britishmuseum.org/introducing-the-assyrians/)
Hegemony was achieved by the continuous march of Assyrian armies, who hacked and sliced their way through all opposition. With the spoils of their victories, Assyrian kings developed vast urban spaces in the Assyrian heartland. Enormous palatial complexes rose out of the ground, bespeckled with the magnificent reliefs for which Assyria is famed. Along with the palaces came imposing city walls, immense temples and ziqqurats, an extraordinary infrastructure of irrigation, and much else besides. This was an imperial center befitting a universal empire.

Assyria’s labor needs were extensive. This fact is often correlated with the Assyrian practice of deportation, a policy with deep roots in the ancient Near East. To slake the Assyrian state’s thirst for labor—so the argument goes—large numbers of people from conquered lands were rounded up and dragged back to the Assyrian heartland. As a category, deportees do not appear to have been consigned to an especially grievous life of toil and servitude—at least not one noticeably worse than that of the established Assyrian lower classes. They were resettled and integrated into the existing pool of workers. By practicing deportation, Assyria quickly enlarged its core population far beyond even the rosiest estimates of natural growth rates.
It is tempting to link the practice of deportation to the insatiable appetite of the imperial center, where more was always wanted and bigger was invariably better. And yet it is not at all clear that the policy of deportation can always be accounted for simply in terms of satisfying a growing demand for labor. Despite its apparent advantages to the Assyrian state, deportation was not without downsides. Forcibly relocating large numbers of people demands a substantial upfront investment. In addition to mobilizing the military force required to compel the surrender of the intended deportees, it is necessary to provide an
armed escort for the process of relocation, provisions and shelter to ensure that the deportees reach their destination in decent health, and various resources to enable their productive resettlement in new homes.

There is not just the matter of expense and difficulty. Deportation caused significant and often irreparable harm to local societies and economies, impoverishing some places for generations. This was no recipe for the sustainable economic exploitation of Assyria’s new provinces. And there were less disruptive and more cost-effective ways of meeting Assyrian labor needs. Once they were integrated in the imperial framework, even territories remote from the Assyrian heartland could supply seasonal workers as required.

Given the significant downsides of deportation, why bother with the policy at all? What was the logic that drove the Assyrian state to engage in sustained mass deportation? The answer to this question likely varied across time and space. If there was a particularly pressing shortage of workers, deportation might become more attractive. Equally, deportation from places that were relatively accessible to the Assyrian heartland and/or had large, concentrated populations offered substantially lower deportation costs. Yet deportation was practiced even in areas remote from the Assyrian core and without notably large or dense populations. What was this about?

Examining the evidence for deportation in a geographically circumscribed part of the Assyrian world can help clarify its operational logic, at least as applied in that region. The Levant—covering the Eastern Mediterranean coastline from the Hatay to Sinai, along with associated inland territories—is an outstanding case study. Many decades of intense archaeological work make it one of Assyria’s best-known subject regions. It has the added benefit of an abundant record of deportation despite its remoteness from Assyria proper. If we want to get at the reasons for deportation in a region where a simple lust for labor is not a compelling explanation, there is no better place to look than the Levant.

Although Assyrian sources record that several hundred thousand people were deported from the Levant, this number was a negligible proportion of the total number of people deported by the Assyrian state. The Levant was not a major supplier of deportees to the Assyrian heartland. Deportation from the Levant was also very unbalanced in time, with most incidents taking place in the second half of the 8th century, within the first few decades following the incorporation of these lands into the Assyrian imperial framework. Thereafter evidence of deportation in the Levant is sporadic. There is no evidence at all of deportation for most of the 7th century.
The long march of deportees begins. (https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-4744-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99)

The flow of deportees from elsewhere into the Levant was even more limited, in no way matching the numbers taken out of the region. What little resettlement did occur was concentrated exclusively in sites of high strategic significance, especially the border zone with Egypt and several important depopulated urban centers. This was a highly restricted resettlement program geared only toward meeting major Assyrian strategic needs: the Levant was simply not the site of intricate demographic engineering by the Assyrian state.

If deportation from the Levant was of minor consequence to the Assyrian labor supply, why did the Assyrian state nevertheless deport so many of its people? In the Assyrian sources, every instance of deportation is presented as a response to rebellion, a punishment for opposing the divinely ordained Assyrian order. It is tempting to dismiss this as mere propaganda, but there is more here than rhetorical bluster. Recorded deportations correlate with known outbreaks of resistance against Assyrian hegemony. The Hebrew Bible concedes the point: the compilers of the Book of Kings admit the guilt of the kings of Israel and Judah, whose failure to acquiesce to Assyrian overlordship brought about the deportation of many of the people of their kingdoms—leading, in the case of Israel, to the loss of the ten tribes that some continue to look for today.
The Assyrian army advances on Lachish, a major stronghold of the kingdom of Judah (701 BCE). (https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-4735-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99)

The assault on Lachish and the fall of the city. (https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-4736-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99)
Lachish - conquest and aftermath, as Assyrian soldiers march out their human and material plunder and mete out exemplary punishments.
(https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47dc-4737-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99)
The Assyrian state baked the threat of deportation into its imperial system. The treaties that bound the Levant to Assyria prominently flaunt deportation as a fitting fate for those peoples, polities, and potentates who did not abide by Assyria's terms. Deportation is also a prominent theme in the reliefs from the great Assyrian palaces, where visiting dignitaries from all parts of the empire would be confronted with graphic visual reminders of the fate that awaited them if they dared to resist Assyrian might.

The deterrent effect of deportation is echoed by the response of some of its victims. Large parts of the Hebrew Bible, and notably the book of Nahum, can be read as a record of the trauma of Assyrian deportation. The pain and anger are palpable in Nahum 3:1, referring to Nineveh, the Assyrian metropolis: "Woe to the city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims!" Some surviving Assyrian letters likewise convey the dread of deportation among its potential victims. Deportation was something to be avoided at all costs.

Instructive, however, is how often the threat of deportation remained just that: a threat. There are many instances in which rebellion against Assyria in the Levant was suppressed without the use of deportation. Tyre was an especially independent-minded and wayward city, and yet its transgressions never resulted in destruction or deportation. In other cases, too, there appears to have been reluctance to deport. Only after numerous incidents of
large-scale resistance were certain polities subjected to deportation, and often these deportations targeted only a small part of the population. Whatever else was going on, the need for labor was not the key consideration.

There is no indication that Assyrian armies ever traipsed through the Levant deporting people willy-nilly. Assyrian deportation in the region was not a crude method for bolstering Assyria’s labor supply. It was instead an important element in Assyria’s toolkit of suppression, serving to intimidate and coerce recalcitrant subjects into cooperation and submission. The threat and the occasional experience of deportation appear to have served their purpose: they contributed substantially to the quiescence of most of the Levant for roughly a century. Places that were subjected to deportation tended not to rebel again.

In the Levant, deportation was one of a range of punishments that the Assyrian state could mete out in response to the crime of resistance. Because of its cost, it was pursued irregularly. The decision to resort to deportation was informed by ad hoc cost-benefit analyses that depended on the availability of the resources required to implement it, the consequences for Assyrian interests of deportation’s destructive impact, an evaluation of the rebels and their proclivity to reoffend, and the needs of the imperial center.

Increasing Assyria’s labor pool was certainly welcome, but it was a secondary benefit. As regarded by its Assyrian practitioners, deportation was first and foremost a matter of crime and punishment. Whether this conclusion holds in other parts of the Assyrian empire remains to be seen.

*Jonathan Valk is University Lecturer in Assyriology at Leiden University.*