

PLUCKY COASTAL TRADERS AND TIMBER FOR EGYPT:

B. Treumann-Warning THOUGHTS ON NIMRUD, LETTER 12

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*"Qurdi-assur-lamur to the king:
With regard to the ruler of Tyre,
of whom the king said that I was
to speak kindly to him - all the*

*quays are open to him, (and) his subjects enter and
leave the quay-houses as they wish, (and) sell and
buy.*

*Mount Lebanon is at his disposal, and they
go up and down as they wish, and bring down the
wood...*

*I appointed a tax-collector over those who
come down to the quays which are in Sidon, but the
Sidonians chased him off...*

*I made a statement to them, that they might
bring down the wood and do their work with it,
(but) that they were not to sell it to the Egyptians or
to the Palestinians, or I would not allow them to go
up to the mountain..."¹.*

This passage from Nimrud Letter 12, dated to the end of the 8th century B.C.,² casts some light, or at least permits speculation on the nature of trade and hinterland production during that era of neo-Assyrian military and administrative control of the central Phoenician coast.

For the purpose of this brief note the most interesting aspect of the document points to an

ongoing and, from the Assyrian point of view, illegal trade in timber with Egypt and Palestine. These regions had been clients of the Phoenician city states for centuries, (and in the case of Egypt) even millennia, buying or bartering for the coniferous timber that grew in the upper ranges of the western slopes of Mount Lebanon. At the turn of the 8th cent B.C. however, Egypt's pervasive presence in Phoenicia and implicit monopolistic claim on this country's most desirable primary resource had become golden memories³.

Nevertheless the desire for quality timber and its by-products in Egypt remained unabated and Sidonian and Tyrian timbermen and merchants were willing and able to respond to these demands. Even if it called for the occasionally rude and perhaps risky behaviour of kicking Assyrian tax-collectors out of quay-side countinghouses⁴. But then the timber business was never for the timid; it would attract and export seasonal workers, hard-scrabble folk, "*homines silvestres...non habitantes sub tecto*" (wild people... people who live in the open) who scared western travellers in the coastal mountains of Syria during the period of the Crusaders⁵. Perhaps such perception is echoed in the Wadi Brissah inscription referring to local populations living on Mount Lebanon as wild and hostile, and a threat to the region during the neo-

¹ N. Postgate, *Taxation and Conscription in the Assyrian Empire* (Rome: 1974) pp. 390 - 391; H.W.F. Saggs, "The Nimrud Letters, 1952-Part II," *Iraq* 17 (1955) : 126 - 129.

² Saggs, *ibid.* p. 126 suggests that the 12 Nimrud letters as a whole are to be dated between about 740 and a few years before 705 B.C. ; R. Meigs, *Trees and Timber in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), p. 75 thinks that letter 12 was probably written in Sargon II's reign and interprets its "alarming news" as a sign of "serious restiveness in Phoenicia."

³ The well-known fortunes and misfortunes of Egyptian presence, influence and control in central Phoenicia need no general reiteration in this context; more specifically though, it is clear that at the time NL 12 was written and in later centuries Egypt, despite several attempts to revive dominance in the north, never succeeded in regaining her former control of Phoenicia. The Saite ruler Psammetichus I (ca. 664-610 B.C.) represents a "new breed" of sovereigns who dealt directly and independently with Greek and enterprising Phoenicians who furnished him with desirable commodities from other regions in the Mediterranean and more exotic far-off places. See D. B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*. (Princeton: University Press, 1993), p. 345 ff.; p. 434; J. Leclant, " Les Phéniciens et l'Égypte," offprint from *Atti del II Congresso Internazionale di Studi Fenici e Punici* . (Roma: Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche, 1991) 10 - 11.

⁴ The idea of a countinghouse is, of course, a metaphor for what may have been central storage facilities to which the timber was brought, stored and made ready for distribution. At any rate, if taxes were to be collected it would have happened at such a gathering place.

⁵ M. Lombard, *Espaces et réseaux du Haut Moyen Age*. (Paris: Mouton Éditeur, 1972) , p. 160.

Babylonian period⁶.

At any rate the business of providing timber to Egypt flourished despite neo-Assyrian embargos. Indeed, at the end the 8th century B.C. and during the following centuries, the entre-

preneurial Phoenician lumberman "so skilled at felling timber"⁷ went probably much farther afield to satisfy the demands of the timber market than just cutting cedars in his own backyard. In search of new and easily accessible supplies that could be tapped without geopolitical encumbrances, he discovered virgin forests in other parts of the Mediterranean offering familiar species of cedar, cypress, pine and highly priced hardwoods⁸.

The pattern of Phoenician contacts and settlements evolving in the late 8th and 7th centuries B.C. across the Mediterranean should, among others, be considered a function of expanding timber exploitation and trade⁹.

6 J. Elayi, "L'exploitation des cèdres du Mont Liban par les rois assyriens et néo-babyloniens," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 21 (1988) 31.

7 I Kings 5:6 the complete sentence in this verse is, "for, as you know, we have none so skilled at felling timber as your Sidonians."

8 J. Lauffray, "Les bois d'œuvre d'origine libanaise. Note à propos de l'étude du kiosque de Taharqa de Karnak." *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 46 (1970): 160 - 162. J. Lauffray suggests the beams used in the roofing of the Taharqua kiosk in Karnak were made of cypress wood (*cupressus semper virens*), and further speculates that it was imported by Phoenicians from Cyrenaica or Crete.

9 This argument and its implications for the western Mediterranean will be the topic of the forthcoming publication of my doctoral dissertation.