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AUTHOR: Rose Mary Sheldon

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Early days of espionage

SPYING IN MESOPOTAMIA

Rose Mary Sheldon

As soon as man learned to create documents, he began to classify them. This is another indication that gathering intelligence is as old as civilization itself. Techniques regarded as completely modern have actually existed for thousands of years. Archaeological discoveries in the Near East, especially in Syria, have uncovered evidence of societies where espionage activities were rampant. Intelligence gathering was second nature to any ruler who wanted to protect the safety and independence of his city and who valued his own life.

Recent political developments in the Middle East have made archaeology difficult or impossible in many places, but excavations have continued sporadically in Syria. Those at Mari, Ebla, and Shubat Enlil have produced results of great interest to intelligence historians. Each site produced a royal archive containing thousands of written documents. These tablets are a priceless record of the political and military history of Syria in the second millenium B.C. Scholars have been transcribing, translating, and publishing these tablets for several decades, but no one has yet made a study of the importance that intelligence gathering had in these societies. The documents provide a fascinating picture of what life was like in the "shadow trade" around 1800 B.C.

Mari, the first of the three cities to be discovered, produced the most important documents. The city occupies a mound called Tell Hariri on the east bank of the Euphrates River, about 10 miles north of the Iraqi frontier. The site was chosen, among other reasons, for its strategic control of traffic on the river. The French uncovered the impressive 100-acre ruins in 1933 and 1934. To date, 2,000 tablets have been recovered. The documents are letters received by the kings of Mari from their officials and from contemporary rulers; a few were written by the Mari kings themselves. Mari's relationships with its neighbors were complex, and much of its diplomatic activity was carried on clandestinely.

Mari Revisited

There was a local dynasty at Mari that ruled around 1815 B.C. Two of the rulers were Yaggid-Lim and his son, Yahdun-Lim. The latter was murdered in a palace conspiracy. The throne of Mari was then seized, and Mari fell under foreign domination from 1813 to 1782 B.C. The usurper Shamshi-Adad ruled from Shubat Enlil and took control of the region around Mari. He put one of his sons, Yasmakh-Adad, on the throne of Mari and another son, Ishme-Dagan, became ruler of Ekallatum.

The local dynasty regained its position when Zimri-Lim, son of Yahdun-Lim, took back the throne of Mari. He was helped by his father-in-law, Yarim-Lim, ruler of the Syrian Kingdom of Yamhad (Aleppo).

In 1757 B.C., Mari was destroyed by the famous Hammurabi of Babylon. Hammurabi marched up the Euphrates against Zimri-Lim, captured his capital and brought his reign to an end. Two years later, he completed the destruction of Mari by levelling its fortification wall.

The greater part of the Mari archive belongs to the time of Zimri-Lim and contains letters from contemporary rulers and intelligence reports from his official representatives at foreign



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courts. A closer look at the correspondence among these rulers reveals a great deal about the role intelligence played in their interstate relations.

Military Intelligence

The correspondence from Hammurabi in Babylon to Zimri-Lim at Mari contains a clear statement about the importance of intelligence to his military operations. With the troops ready to fight and the gods consulted for the proper signs, the King needed to devise a strategy for victory, but he knew this depended on a knowledge of the enemy's strength, position, and intentions.

In one letter, Hammurabi states: "I will not send (troops) as long as I do not have information concerning the enemy." In another letter, he writes to the emissary of Zimri-Lim:

"At the start of the month of KUR, the enemy performed reading of entrails to which god did not respond affirmatively. He is (therefore) going toward his destruction. That's good. Let . . . [a messenger] remain for (at least) five days until we see complete information concerning the enemy. [when] we see complete information concerning the enemy, I will permit him [the messenger] (to go), (then) let him go."

Texts containing specific troops movements are not uncommon. For example, one stated:

"A report about Ekallatum has also come, a 15,000 men army—Yaggikh-Addu has conspired to make trouble at the bank of the Euphrates—has attacked/entered my lord's land."

Good and timely intelligence allowed the army of Mari to surprise its enemies, usually in the form of ambush or deception operations. After Shamshi-Adad conquered the area around Mari and put his son on the throne, he then produced a stream of letters to his son containing advice on military matters. The father warns:

"All of you are constantly trying tricks (stratagems) and maneuvering endlessly to destroy the enemy. The enemy likewise constantly tries tricks and endlessly maneuvers against you, just as wrestlers try to trick one another all the time . . . I hope that the enemy will not maneuver you into an ambush."

The texts frequently refer to ambushes, which require advance intelligence of the enemy's intention and position. Shamshi-Adad was a veteran practitioner of this art, and he never missed an opportunity to lure an unsuspecting foe into a trap.

Two examples of deception are described in some detail. In one, Ishme-Dagan allows a badly harried enemy army to cross a river into safe territory and then leaves it alone. What it does not know, however, is that a contingent of Ishme-Dagan's forces had previously been sent to that side. After the enemy army progressively lowers its vigilance and begins to feel safe, the contingent attacks and delivers the fatal blow. A second stratagem has Ishme-Dagan attack a friendly territory with a guerrilla group formed by his own men in disguise.

Use of Spies

The bulk of military information was obtained through espionage, a vocation which appealed to all sorts of people. Among others, diplomats and messengers of both enemy and ally were suspected of spying. The people of Zalmaqum were among the most famous spies or informers (called *sa lisanim*, or those willing to give information to the enemy). They could not be trusted, however, unless they were paid enormous sums of money. Even then, there was no

guarantee that they would be effective or loyal. Shamshi-Adad warns his son at Mari: "Do not take into service the men of Zalmaqum who are continually recruited as spies."

Recruiting people with the right qualifications was easy. Hammurabi once sent a contingent of 120 men to the gate of a city, and they collected a number of men willing to act as spies. Money was the most obvious incentive for espionage. Many volunteered information concerning their own tribe in the hope of a reward. Some refugees hoped for food and shelter, in exchange for their contributions. Others did it for the excitement, the intrigue, or the sheer love of gossip. Nomadic tribesmen were always feared to be involved in espionage activities.

An Intelligence Center

Hammurabi and other rulers needed to collect intelligence, but they also tried to keep their own secret plans of action from falling into enemy hands. A special bureau was set up in the palace at Mari to translate and analyze captured documents, to retain copies of secret dispatches, and generally to keep the king up to date on intelligence matters. The bureau probably was headed by trusted officials, and intelligence poured into it from every kind of source. Even reports provided by the Queen were collected, evaluated, and filed. Information was extracted from gossipy merchants, wandering artisans, messengers, sailors and refugees. On a more official level, there were reports sent by ambassadors at the court of allied and neutral powers. One diplomatic envoy was also a part-time military commander who represented Mari at the court of Hammurabi in Babylon. His letters are filled with information he claims to have gathered from what he called his "secret sources," possibly other military commanders, diplomats and royal courtiers.

Among the most intriguing items found in this archive are the documents marked "secret." One tablet contains a report on which was inscribed at the top "THIS IS A SECRET TABLET," possibly the earliest recorded instance of a classified document. The marking probably would restrict access to the document by unauthorized readers, guarantee that it was carried by a trusted messenger, and let the recipient know it was "for your eyes only." There is no other information about such documents, aside from the fact that the letters were sent in clay envelopes marked with the seal of the royal minister or king to ensure privacy. The importance of protecting information from the enemy is recognized in an omen text which says that evil consequences almost always develop "if the 'word' went out to the enemy."

Subversion and Betrayal

All the local kings seem to have engaged in subversive activities intended to weaken their enemies' resistance or to overthrow their leaders. For example, Shamshi-Adad used fifth columnists in his conquest of Zalmaqum. Despite his earlier warnings about their untrustworthiness, he found them useful in this enterprise. He writes to his son in Mari about entrusting certain men of Zalmaqum with a delicate mission:

"To the first one who is hired for you, give him instructions concerning the raids, and let him go to the midst of the land . . . As all Zalmaqum . . . they will say thus: 'our Lord is our only chief; he will not plunder us.' This is what they will understand. They will listen. So that when (I march) into this land, it will entirely revolt, all at once. Act in this manner."

Shamshi-Adad also was famous for dispatching propagandists, who were known as "men of rumors." These men were successful in at least two cases, where it was emphasized that the rumors of an advancing Assyrian army were enough to lead the enemy to abandon its positions.

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In one case, Yasmakh-Adad writes to his father, Shamshi-Adad, "Who has caused the troops to revolt? Two soldiers. And these two men, in creating fear, caused the troops to revolt."

Internal Security

The texts make numerous references to assassination attempts. Political assassinations and palace intrigues were commonplace in the second millennium B.C. At times, even the deities offered advice to the kings about their own safety. One tablet warns a king not to enter the city without taking an oracle. Another warning comes from the goddess Annunitum, who speaks through an ecstatic female:

"Zimri-Lim. They will test you in a rebellion. Protect yourself. Your servants, your commissioners whom you love, place (them) at your side. Cause them to stand (by you) so that they guard you. Do not even walk alone. As to those who will test you, I will deliver them into your hands."

A king was not a hopeless victim waiting to be picked off. He had spies to test people's loyalty and enforcement procedures for those whose loyalty did not stand up. When "ringleaders who have caused a disturbance" were caught, their fate was not enviable. One text speaks of a conspirator being beheaded; another had his skull crushed. Unlike modern times, when orders to assassinate someone are often verbal, there is text from Zimri-Lim giving instructions in writing for the elimination of an undesirable person:

"My lord wrote me the following about Yarim-Dagan who formerly lived in Dunnum, but who has now gone to Ilum-muluk. (Locate) this man. If there is a ditch in the countryside or in the city, make this man disappear, whether he climbs heaven or sinks into hell, let no one see him (anymore)."

This is actually the content of the aforementioned letter marked SECRET. Punishment was extended to include the plotter's household and his companions in crime. A judgment was given that "the one who has thought up or knows a plot, let him and his household be burnt."

Ebla and Tell Leilan

The site of Tell Mardikh was being excavated by the University of Rome for almost a decade before an inscription on a statue identified it as the city of Ebla. Subsequent excavations produced more than 17,000 clay tablets, approximately 1,650 of which have been published. Most of the Ebla texts, however, have little to do with military espionage.

The Ebla archives mention a city called Shubat Enlil, which was an important center on the Habur Plains of northern Syria. Its exact location, however, would not be discovered by archaeologists until 1985.

The site of Tell Leilan, on the west bank of the Wadi Jarrah in northeastern Syria and 175 miles north of Mari, is one of the largest in northern Mesopotamia. In 1978, Yale University began excavations at Tell Leilan. At that time, the identification of Tell Leilan with Shubat Enlil had not been made. In 1982, the first mud-brick walls and the columns of a royal temple were uncovered. In 1985, 13 tablets discovered in one room of the temple proved that Tell Leilan was indeed the ruins of the ancient capital of Shubat Enlil.

Another 1,100 tablets were found in September and October of 1987, making this the largest single collection of written material found in northern Mesopotamia in more than a half century. According to the tablets, Shubat Enlil was the capital of King Shamshi-Adad. His empire stretched from the Euphrates across the north of the Zagros Mountains of Iran. No city

ruler could successfully challenge the armed forces of Shamshi-Adad within this region during his reign of less than 35 years (1813-1782 B.C.).

The Tell Leilan tablets disclose how rulers of this time deployed spies, called scouts or "eyes," to check up on each other's activities, how they were sometimes captured, and how treaties were negotiated for their return through the payment of ransom. As the Mari archives have shown, Shamshi-Adad was a clever strategist and a master "spy runner." His death was a major event in Mesopotamia. In the tumultuous two decades that followed, the princes and kings of the city-states on the Habur Plains ransacked and pillaged Shubat Enlil and fought with each other over its spoils.

Epilogue

The city-states of Mesopotamia endured for a thousand years after Shamshi-Adad's death, until overwhelmed by the Achaemenid Kings of Persia around 500 B.C. Their sun-baked clay tablets endured another 2,000 years, when they were found by archaeologists, who usually fire the clay to preserve it indefinitely. Because Mesopotamians are still fighting Persians, it is difficult to sustain excavations. Although the publication of the Mari documents has proceeded methodically over the years, no one has ever published the original tablet marked SECRET, and no one claims to know the whereabouts of the original tablet. One can conclude that, after 3000 years, the document remains classified.