

I FEARED THE SNOW AND TURNED BACK¹

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ABSTRACT

In an account of his seventh campaign, Sennacherib states that he feared the snow, immediately turned his army around, and quickly returned to Nineveh. This paper examines how the Neo-Assyrians reacted to snow and cold weather – a short story of risks, excuses, responsibilities, fears, cowardice, and courage.

1. INTRODUCTION

On 11 January 2008, it snowed in Baghdad. For many of its citizens, it was the first real snow they had seen in their lifetime. It made a deep impression, since the snow was welcomed as “an omen of peace,”² “a sign of hope.”³ One resident remarked: “Maybe it is a sign of God, maybe it will heal the wounds of the Iraqis and make them live peacefully again.”⁴

Indeed, in December and January occasional cyclonic storms can bring heavy snowfall to northern Iraq, and once in a while it even snows as far south as Baghdad.⁵ Before reviewing the textual evidence, a look at “actual” climatological reports concerning winter in the Near East may prove useful since present-day climatic conditions in the region are comparable with those of the last 6000 years,⁶ including those of the Neo-Assyrian period.

¹ With great pleasure I present this “snow-white” contribution to Prof. Simo Parpola, in remembrance of the Finnish winters in which he taught me and other interested students about the Neo-Assyrian language, culture, and history. I would like to thank M. Luukko and J. Novotny for their critical remarks and useful suggestions.

² A. Doyle (Reuters, 11 January 2008) *World Warming Despite Cool Pacific and Baghdad Snow* (<http://www.reuters.com/article/environmentNews/idUSL1171501720080111?sp=true>).

³ ABC News (11 January 2008) *Iraqis Declare Baghdad Snow a Sign of Hope* (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/01/11/2136920.htm>).

⁴ P.J. Lyons (The Lede, 11 January 2008) *Of All Things in Baghdad, Snow*, quoting Mr. Fadam, a 41-year-old Iraqi (<http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/11/of-all-things-in-baghdad-snow/>).

⁵ Boesch 1939: 333.

⁶ Bagg (2000: 309) states, referring to Buringh (1960: 47), that it is “generally accepted among experts that climatic conditions have not changed significantly in the region in the last 6000

The coldest months are December, January, and February. During these winter months the passage of Mediterranean depressions brings unsettled weather to Iraq,⁷ “frosts are fairly common, whilst hail and even snow may fall.”⁸ In northern Mesopotamia, precipitation normally occurs from December to March, but both the distribution and amounts of rain are variable.⁹ In the high mountain ranges of the Taurus and Zagros to the north and east of Mesopotamia, snow usually accumulates heavily in January–February, while the greatest rainfall occurs in March–April. The highest summits are covered with snow for most of the year.¹⁰

Evidently, precipitation has its influence on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which have their sources in the Turkish highlands. When the rains start in November, the level of the rivers increases. During December–January, however, the level rises only slowly, as “a large amount of the precipitation remains in the hills in the form of snow.” Afterwards, with the advance of spring, the level rises steadily; the snowmelt in the mountains triggers the inundation of Tigris and Euphrates, which reach their highest flood level in late spring. Subsequently, the levels begin to decrease, until, in September–October, the river levels normally reach their lowest point.¹¹

In the 19th century, the first Western explorers in the area recorded their observations of the weather. Paul-Émile Botta noted that during some winters no snow falls in the mountains: “Although a great amount of rain obstructed my operations at Mosul, by a most unfortunate contrast very little snow had fallen in the mountains during the winter of 1844–45, so that not only was the Tigris far from attaining its usual height, but it began to decrease much before the accustomed time.”¹² Yet, it “happens that the season passes without rain,” as Sir Austen Henry Layard experienced at the beginning of 1847, when he recorded that “there was no rain, not even the prospect of a shower [...] nor had any snow fallen in the mountains to promise a considerable rise in the river.”¹³

years.” However, drier periods with drought and famine may alternate with cooler and rainier intervals (see, e.g., Neumann & Parpola 1987).

⁷ Ionides 1937: 24.

⁸ Ionides 1937: 27.

⁹ Hence dry farming is not without risk and irrigation is needed to ensure the crops and increase the yield (Bagg 2000: 309). Bagg describes several hydraulic engineering projects to provide water for the Assyrian capitals.

¹⁰ Taha *et al.* 1981: 226; “Until late in spring, when the lowland is already changing to a brown desert, one can see from one of the hills in the vicinity of Mosul a northerly semicircle of snowy peaks in the far distance” (Boesch 1939: 334–335).

¹¹ Ionides 1937: 58 (about the Euphrates).

¹² Bonomi 1857: 26.

¹³ Layard 1849: 69, 71, 73.

Likewise, a fragmentary Neo-Assyrian letter from Tušhan (modern Ziyaret Tepe) records:

a [x x x x x x] / *la-a zi-'i'-[nu]* / *la-a ku-up-p[u]* / *i-zi-nu-nu-[ni]* / A.MEŠ *ina*
 in *la-[āš-šú]*, “[Because] it has neither rained nor snowed [...], the[re is] no
 water in the river.”¹⁴ SAA 5 26:8'-r.1

The opposite was true in 1850, when Layard noticed: “It was not until the month of April, [...] that the floods, from the melting of the snows in the higher mountains of Kurdistan, swept down the valley of the Tigris. [...] Owing to extraordinary storms in the hills, the river rose suddenly and with unexampled rapidity. [...]. The Jaif¹⁵ was one vast sea, and a furious wind drove the waves against the foot of the mound [Nimrud]. The Arabs had never seen a similar inundation, and before they could escape to the high land many persons were overwhelmed in the waters.”¹⁶

Cool and rainy winters were generally preferred, as the increased precipitation provided favourable conditions for producing good crops and a prosperous harvest.¹⁷

2. SNOW PERILS IN THE NEO-ASSYRIAN PERIOD

Letters and royal inscriptions reporting on the mountainous regions to the north, northeast and east of Assyria occasionally mention snow.¹⁸ By referring to local weather reports announcing heavy snowfall and very cold temperatures, Assyrian governors or vassal kings could justify delays in the delivery of men, tribute, or animals (e.g., SAA 5 146:7-11; SAA 15 60:6-12, 61 r.9'-11'). Other texts describe the effect of snow on harvests (SAA 15 100 r.10'-16'), the moving of saplings (SAA 5 105 r.5-9), or the construction of houses (SAA 15 41:5'-14').

The texts selected for this article, however, emphasize the dangers snow and cold weather posed for men and horses, and the considerations, fears, and risks taken when confronted with snow. These texts are organized chronologically.

¹⁴ [Ašipā], the author of the letter, probably had to deliver door beams (mentioned in r.6), which he normally threw in the river for transport (as he states in SAA 5 25 r.2'-3').

¹⁵ I.e., Nimrud's pasture lands.

¹⁶ Layard 1853: 204.

¹⁷ Neumann & Parpola 1987: 162.

¹⁸ Only one text mentioning snow originates from the west. In ND 2737, raiders try to take refuge in a “snow-covered mountain” (l. 12' *KUR-e ša ku-pe-'e'*). Na'aman (2004) identifies this mountain as Jebel Aqra'; the identification is possible, albeit still uncertain.

The vocabulary used to denote snow is limited in Akkadian.¹⁹ In Neo-Assyrian, the word *kupû* stands for “snow, snowfall; ice”;²⁰ *šalgu* is its Standard Babylonian counterpart, which is used in royal inscriptions.

Tiglath-pileser III

In a letter, Duri-Aššur, the governor of Tušhan, states that too much snow prevented his messenger from escorting some informers²¹ to the king with information about the enemy (*ku-pu-ú* : KALAG-*an* / *a-dan-niš* ND 2720 [= NL 29] r.2–3). To drive his point home, he reports that any scout he sends out, returns empty-handed:

LÚ.*da-a-a-lim* / *a-sa-par* : *i-su-ḥu-ru-ni* / [*m*] *a a-ka ni-il-lak* / *'ki'-ma ku-pu-ú* / *'im-te-ti* : *i-tab-bi-ú* / *'e'-ru-bu*, “I have sent out scouts but they have turned back, saying: ‘Where can we go?’ – As soon as the snow decreases, they will set off and *enter*.” ND 2720 r.3–8

It makes one wonder how this letter could reach the palace, while scouts and messengers of this governor were unable to go anywhere.

Sargon II

Sargon summoned Nabû-belu-ka”in²² to Calah on the first of Nisan (I), but the governor of Kar-Šarrukin (modern Malayer) had to excuse himself: snow blocked the roads. Although Nabû-belu-ka”in tried to have them cleared, it was to no avail:

ḥu-la-a-ni ni-pat-ti / *i-šak-kan ku-pu-u ú-ma-la* / *ku-pu-u i-di-in a-dan-niš*, “We are clearing the roads, but it is snowing and snow is filling them up. There is a great deal of snow.” ND 2359+ (= SAA 15 83 = NL 61 + NL 63): 8–10

There was no way he could reach the capital on time. He reminds the king of what happened two years earlier, when:

ki an-ni [ma] / *ku-pu-u i-di-in* / ID.MEŠ *i-dan-na* LÚ.ERIM.MEŠ / [A]NŠE.KUR.RA.ME[Š] *ša i-si-ia* / *ina ku-pe-e [m]i-e-tú*, “There was as much snow, the rivers were swollen²³ and the men and horses who were with me died in the snow.” ND 2359+: 15–19

¹⁹ The Sami people of Lapland have more than 100 words for snow and ice, in Finnish over 40 words are used to express all forms of frozen precipitation (even though Finnish lacks the verb “to snow”, cf., http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=1201359 for a long list of Finnish words for snow).

²⁰ *kupû* (AEAD: 52), written *kuppû* in CAD K: 551 and AHw. 509.

²¹ Line e.12 needs to be collated. Saggs (2001: 144) reads this line as LÚ.*tur-t[a-n]u*, and Luukko (personal communication) reads it as LÚ.DUMU-KIN-*i[a]*; however, I would not exclude the reading LÚ.*EME-ME* as in r.9.

²² See PNA 2/II: 815–817.

²³ “With the beginning of winter-rains the water rises slightly, but the great flood does not come until the snow melts in the mountains” (Boesch 1939: 338).

This was a heavy toll he is not willing to pay again. One can speculate that Nabû-beluka²⁴ was not familiar with severe winters when he took his job at Kar-Šarrukin, and had underestimated the dangers to his troops and horses that first winter. This time, however, rather than risking everyone's lives, he promised to be in the king's presence on the 6th or 7th of Nisan instead, a reasonable compromise.

Also in propaganda and warfare, snow could play a part – even if only to create a more frightening and dramatic battle scene. Sargon's eighth campaign as recorded in his letter to the god Aššur (714 BC),²⁵ for instance, has a very graphic description²⁶ of the impenetrable Mount Wauš. With summits reaching into the sky, regions no living being ever passed, an interior no traveller has seen, and where no birds fly or build their nests, the mountain is portrayed as a most unwelcoming place. Moreover, Mount Wauš is as steep as the blade of a dagger, and cut by gorges and mountain streams. To top it all, on this mountain it snows day and night, winter and summer, and the temperature is inhumanly cold:

*i-na um-še GAL.MEŠ ù dan-na-at EN.TE.NA ša qa-áš-tu šu-kud-du (i-na) še-rim li-lá-a-ti u[š-ta-bar-ru]-ú²⁷ ni-pi-iḫ-šu-un šal-gu ur-ru ù mu-šu še-ru-uš-šu kit-mu-ru-ma gi-mir la-a-ni-šu lit-[bu-šu šal-gu²⁸] ù šu-ri-pu / e-ti-iq i-te-e-šu i-na ši-biḫ im-ḫul-li zu-mur-šu i-šab-bi-tu ina da-[na-an e-ri-ia-t]i uq-ṭam-mu-ú UZU.MEŠ-ŠÚ, “In the great heat (of summer) and the severe cold of winter – when the rising of Bow Star and Arrow Star (= Sirius, a *Canis Maioris*) can be observed in the morning and in the evening, respectively – snow accumulates on it (= Mount Wauš) day and night, and its whole face is covered with snow and ice, the body of him who crosses its border is hit by a strong storm wind (and) his flesh is frostbitten by the se[vere col]d.” TCL 3: 100–102*

Right there, at this most horrifying spot, the Urartian king Rusâ gathered his troops and set a trap for Sargon. The Assyrian army was already exhausted. Nevertheless, Sargon himself – according to his self-aggrandizing boasts – did not fear the large host of Urartian troops (TCL 3: 131) and heroically defeated them.²⁸ The severe cold and snow-covered peaks, marvels of nature, give more colour to the description of Sargon's victory over the joint forces of Urartu and Zikirtu, making his triumph

²⁴ Possibly, though there is still disagreement about this, he may have operated in the Diyala region *before* he became the governor of Kar-Šarrukin (see PNA 2/II: 816), and thus dealing with snow may have been a new reality for him.

²⁵ See, e.g., Mayer 1980.

²⁶ Mountains seem to inspire colourful comparisons, cf., e.g., Fletcher's description of the lofty mountains in the neighbourhood of Ulaş (Turkey): “Here everything presented images of the most sublime character. The sun's rays lit up the whole, and cast into strong relief the lofty peaks of the mountain giants, each rearing his snowy crest resembling the plumed casque of some ancient Titan, and exulting in his strength. Dark ravines yawned at our side, and disclosed masses of vegetation at the bottom of their profound abysses, while here and there a rivulet fell with gentle murmurs from rock to rock, and finally precipitated itself with a loud roar into some basin, prepared by nature's hand to receive it down below” (Fletcher 1850: 65).

²⁷ Cf. CAD Š: 229 (sub lemma *šukūdu* 2b).

²⁸ For the *topos* of Sargon's personal participation in the battle on Mount Wauš, see Kristensen 1988: 88.

even more epic. However, in spite of this cold and wintry depiction, one should not forget that this campaign was finished before winter set in and snow and ice blocked the treacherous mountain passes.²⁹

Possibly towards the end of Sargon's reign,³⁰ Urdu-Sîn³¹ informed the palace herald that the Cimmerian king had left Mannea and entered Urartu.³² The terrified Urartians were assembling troops, and, more precisely, the Urartian governor of Waisi had asked Urzana of Muşaşir for military aid. The Urartians hoped:

i-su-ri / ki-ma ku-pu-u / i-di-i-ni / ma-a ni-za-qu-pu / ina UGU-ḫi-šu,
 “Perhaps we can attack him (= the Cimmerian), once there is more snow.”
 SAA 5 145 r.10–14

This remark shows that the letter was probably sent at the onset of winter. The Urartians clearly hoped that the snow would hinder a Cimmerian invasion and give their own troops a better chance to succeed.³³

Sennacherib

In the royal inscriptions, Assyrian kings are regularly characterized as “fearless in battle.”³⁴ Sargon stated that he did not fear the large host of Urartian troops in the battle on Mount Wauš, where it snowed continuously (see above). Yet, in a remarkable passage in his royal inscriptions, Sennacherib openly admits that he had been afraid. The report of Sennacherib's seventh campaign (693 BC) begins as follows:

i-na 7-e gir-ri-ia aš-šur be-lí ú-tak-kil-an-ni-ma / a-na KUR.e-lam-ti lu al-lik, “In my 7th campaign, Aššur, my lord, encouraged me, so I marched to Elam.” Chicago // Taylor Prism (= Frahm 1997: T16) iv 54–55

Under divine blessing, Sennacherib managed to recapture Bit-Ha'iri and Rašâ, cities Elam had taken away from Assyria during his father's reign; 34 large and a number of smaller Elamite cities were captured, destroyed, and burnt. Terrified, Kudur-Naḫḫunte (= Kudur-naḫundu), the Elamite king, abandoned his royal city Madaktu and fled to Ḫidalu, in the distant mountains – in short, another successful campaign for Assyria. However, just as Sennacherib ordered his army to march upon Madaktu, winter set in. The king reports:

²⁹ Zimansky 1990: 3.

³⁰ Mayer (1993: 173) argues that this letter may date from the end of Sargon's or possibly even from the beginning of Sennacherib's reign.

³¹ Probably an informer or a spy (Lanfranchi 1990: 22).

³² SAA 5 145.

³³ Kristensen 1988: 71–72.

³⁴ E.g., Assurnāširpal II (RIMA 2 A.0.101.1 i 13, 20, and *passim*), Shalmaneser III (RIMA 3 A.0.102.5 i 4) and Esarhaddon (Borger 1956: 96, Mnm A 22).

ITI.tam-ḫi-ri EN.TE.NA dan-nu e-ru-ba-am-ma / ša-mu-tú ma-at-tum ú-šá-az-ni-na A.AN.MEŠ-šá / A.AN.MEŠ ú šal-gi na-aḫ-lu na-at-bak KUR-i a-du-ra / pa-an ni-ri-ia ú-tir-ma a-na NINA.KI aš-ša-bat / ḫar-ra-nu, “In the month Tamhiru (i.e. Tebet [X]) a severe cold set in and heavy rain clouds poured out their waters. I feared the rain and snow (would swell) the wadis (and) mountain gullies,³⁵ so I (immediately) turned my chariot around and (hastily) took the road (back) to Nineveh.” Chicago // Taylor Prism v 7–11³⁶

The decision to return to the capital, or, in other words, to end the campaign early, out of fear of the coming winter, is quite unique among Assyrian sources. One could interpret this fear as a sign of weakness or cowardice, but of humanity also. On the other hand, blaming the weather, Sennacherib had a perfectly reasonable excuse to leave the area, even though he had not reached Madaktu or confronted Kudur-Naḫḫunte, nor had he regained control over Babylonia. Moreover, as the weather is supposed to be supportive of the king’s intentions – so it is determined by the gods,³⁷ the next lines read:

i-na UD-me-šu-ma i-na qí-bit^d aš-šur EN-ia / ^mNÍG.GUB-^dna-ḫu-un-du LUGAL KUR.NIM.MA.KI 3 ITI.MEŠ / ul ú-mal-li-ma i-na UD-me la ší-im-ti-šú / ur-ru-ḫi-iš im-tu-ut EGIR-šú ^mum-man-me-na-nu / la ra-áš ṭe-e-me ú mil-ki / ŠEŠ-šú dup-pu-us-su-ú i-na GIŠ.GU.ZA-šú ú-šib-ma, “At that time, by the command of Aššur, my lord, Kudur-nahundu, the king of Elam, suddenly died an untimely death before three months had passed. After him, Umman-menanu, who had neither sense nor judgment,³⁸ his younger brother, sat on his throne.” Chicago // Taylor Prism v 11–16

³⁵ When the rain falls on the bare hillsides, it pours down in torrents into the main rivers (Ionides 1937: 226).

³⁶ There are three variants of this passage: 1) *a-na URU.ma-dak-te URU LUGAL-ti-šú a-la-ku aq-bi* ITI.AB *ku-uš-šu dan-nu ik-šu-dam-ma / ša-mu-tum la-zi-iz-tum il-lik-ma šal-gu na-ḫal-lum na-at-bak KUR-i a-du-ra ú-tir-ma / a-na KUR-aš-šur.KI aš-ba-ta ḫar-ra-na*, “I commanded to march to Madaktu, his royal city. (But) in Tebet (X), a severe cold arrived and the rain poured down constantly. I feared the snow (would swell) the wadis (and) mountain streams, and (immediately) turned back. I (hastily) took the road to Assyria.” (Nebi Yunus inscription [= Frahm 1997: T61]: 42–44); 2) [*a-na URU.ma-dak-te URU MAN-ti-šú a-la-ku aq-bi* ITI.AB *ku-uš-šu dan-nu / [ik-šu-dam-ma pa-an ni-ri-ia] a-ú-tir-ma a-na KUR-aš-šur.KI aš-ba-ta ḫar-ra-nu*, “I commanded to march [to Madaktu], his [royal city]. (But in) Tebet (X) a severe cold [set in], so I (immediately) turned m[y chariot] around and (hastily) took the road to Assyria.” (Frahm 1997: 131/132, T62: lines 23–24); and 3) [*a-na URU.ma-dak-ti*] / [UR]U LU[GAL]-*ti-šú a-la-[ku] aq-bu-ú* ITI.AB *ku-uš-šu dan-n[ú] ik-šu-dam-ma x x x x x x x x] / [šá]-^r a-ru zu-un-nu ^ršal-gu^r [i]m-da-ḫa-ru na-ḫa-al-li na-a[t-bak KUR-i a-du-ra pa-an ni-ri-ia ú-tir-ru-ma] / [a]-n[a KUR]-aš-[šur aš-ba]-tu ḫa[r-ra]-nu*, “I commanded to march [to Madaktu], his ro[yal ci]ty. (But) in Tebet (X), a severe cold [set in] . . . The w[ind], rain, and snow came in equal force [(and) I feared] (that they would swell) the wadis (and) [mountain] gul[lies, and (immediately) turned my chariot around. [I (hastily) too]k the r[oa]ld to As[syria].” (Walters Art Gallery Sennacherib Inscription [= Frahm 1997: T123]: 38–41 [Grayson 1963: 90–91]).

³⁷ Van Driel 1992: 41.

³⁸ This can be seen as a demeaning reference to an enemy who had caused the Assyrian king a good deal of trouble (cf. Laato 1995: 213).

This shows that Sennacherib's decision was ultimately the right one, a decision fit for the "king of justice," "keeper of righteousness, lover of justice, one who does charity, who comes to the aid of the destitute, who turns to acts of kindness."³⁹ He must have known that many of his troops and horses would not survive a severe winter in the mountains, let alone a fight.⁴⁰ Returning home, he could avoid many losses (including his own), and, luckily for him, Kudur-Nahhunte "died an untimely death" soon after.⁴¹ In this way, Sennacherib's scribes could present his "retreat" as a victory, even without the final confrontation in Elam.

Nevertheless, if the Elamite king had not died, this passage would probably have been written in a different way. As things turned out, however, the depiction of the king's just fear reveals a righteous king, a king who cares for his people, for Assyria. What could be better propaganda than this?

Esarhaddon

As the youngest son of Sennacherib, Esarhaddon's path to the throne was not made easy. Being discredited in Assyria by his brothers' accusations, Esarhaddon went into hiding, possibly in the mountainous regions to the north of Ḫanigalbat, "an area of high, wooded valleys, thickly covered with snow in winter, an area which would have been hard for an army to traverse in winter, [...] and which would have offered ideal hiding places for an Assyrian political fugitive,"⁴² or maybe even in Ḫarran, if Leichty's suggestion proves correct that Ḫarran was the ancestral home of his mother Naqi'a and thus a place where his relatives could offer him protection and shelter.⁴³ Meanwhile his brothers (probably including Urdu-Mullissi) murdered Sennacherib in an attempt to seize power. When the news reached Esarhaddon, he departed without delay, and headed back to Nineveh. Nothing could stop him, certainly not the weather:

šal-gu ku-uš-šu ITI.ZIZ *dan-na-at* EN.TE.NA *ul a-dur*, "I was not afraid of the snow and cold of the month Shebat (XI), the dead of winter." Borger 1956: 44, Nin A i 66

³⁹ A series of titles used to portray Sennacherib, see Tadmor 2004 (Chicago // Taylor Prism i 4–6).

⁴⁰ Compare Boesch (1939: 333): "Summer passes into winter without an autumn; the temperature drops rapidly, and precipitation increases with each new storm. The heavy rainfall, absorbed neither by vegetation nor soil, is collected in a few huge catchment basins and carried away in broad wadis, many times causing great destruction, damage and death to man and beast in its lower reaches, and blocking all traffic for days."

⁴¹ According to the Babylonian Chronicle Kudur-(Nahhunte) was taken prisoner in a rebellion and killed after a rule of ten months (Babylonian Chronicle 1 iii 13–15 [Grayson 1975: 80; Glassner 2004: 198–199, 206–207]).

⁴² Porter 1993: 23.

⁴³ Leichty 2007. Note, however, that there is no certain evidence about the origins of Naqi'a (Melville 1999:13–16).

However, even today, roads and mountain passes in eastern Turkey can be closed due to too much snow. So, in Shebat (January–February), in the dead of winter, Esarhaddon’s journey back from the mountains may have been difficult – even apart from his encounter with an opposing army. In spite of this, his statement can be interpreted as a hidden accusation against Sennacherib, who feared the snow in Elam and turned back (see above). In this inscription from Nineveh, Esarhaddon is depicted as a strong leader whose path to the throne was littered with obstacles⁴⁴ and who, unlike his father, was not deterred by severe weather conditions. The difference in attitude and behaviour between father and son in the given circumstances probably characterizes Esarhaddon’s divergent ideological stance right from the beginning of his reign and stresses his deliberate distancing from his father’s rule.⁴⁵

Assurbanipal

The last text of my selection does not mention any snow, but it does stress the cold weather conditions in Shebat (XI, January–February), the same month mentioned by Esarhaddon, who underlined that it is “the dead of winter”, the coldest period of the year.⁴⁶

In ABL 302 (K 96),⁴⁷ Assurbanipal replies to Nabû-šar-aḥḥešu’s message concerning review horses:

1	<i>a-bat</i> LUGAL	1	The king’s word to Nabû-šar-aḥḥešu: I
2	<i>a-na</i> ^{md} PA–MAN–PAB–MEŠ–ŠÚ		am well. You can be glad.
3	DI–mu <i>ia-a-ši</i>		
4	ŠÀ–ba–ka		
5	<i>lu-u ṭa-ab-ka</i>		
6	<i>ina</i> UGU ANŠE.KUR.RA.MEŠ	6	With regard to the horses <i>of</i> the review
7	<i>ša ma-šar-te</i>		about which you wrote to me – we shall
8	<i>ša taš-pur-an-ni</i>		send them <i>along the way</i> within the month
9	<i>ši-dīm-ma</i> ⁴⁸ <i>ina</i> ŠÀ ITI		of Adar (XII).

⁴⁴ See also Porter 1993: 26.

⁴⁵ See Tadmor (1997: 328–329) on how the royal inscriptions reflect the divergent ideological stances of the successive Neo-Assyrian kings. Think also of “Sargon’s sin,” which may demonstrate that Esarhaddon’s coming to terms with the past differed greatly from that of Sennacherib (Tadmor, Landsberger & Parpola 1989; Frahm 1999: 85–86).

⁴⁶ Cf. also *ina* ITI.ĀŠ *ina qé-reb* EN.TE.NA, “in the month Shebat, in the middle of winter” (CT 38 pl. 34:33 [*Šumma ālu*]; KAR 212 r. ii 21).

⁴⁷ Recently edited by Zaccagnini 1994: 40–41 and Fales 2000b: 269 (ll. 6–r.9). This letter is beautifully preserved, and yet extremely difficult due to its peculiar orthography, grammar, and vocabulary. Moreover, it is rare that a king bothers to give such a detailed explanation of the reason why a delivery of horses will be late. Possibly, these horses were highly valuable, or the king had a more personal relationship with Nabû-šar-ahhešu. I offer here a tentative translation and interpretation.

⁴⁸ The syllabic reading value *dīm* is unique in the Assyrian letter corpus; cf., however, the use of the (pseudo)logogram *DĪM* in *alandimmū* (ALAM.DĪM–mu–u, e.g. in the inventories SAA 7 49 r. i 6’; 50 i 1’, 10’; and 52:10), *nigdimimmū* (NĪG.DĪM.DĪM–mu–u/NĪG.DĪM.DĪM.MA in SAA 7 52:11 and

- 10 *šá* ITL.ŠE⁴⁹ *ni-šap-par*⁵⁰
 11 *al-ka ki-i* LÚ*.GİR.AD₄ ¹¹ Come! We have already sent (word) early
 12 *ik-rim-u-ni*⁵¹ in Shebat (XI) that the *crippled detained*
 13 *nu-uḫ-tar-rib* (the consignment).
 14 *ina šá* ITL.ZIZ *ni-is-sa-par*
 r.1 *ina dan-ni-te šá ku-uš-šu* ^{r.1} (Moreover,) in the severity of winter,
 2 *ina ku-uš-ši-im-ma* when it is very cold, (the horses) would die
 3 *ina ku-uš-šu i-mut-tú*⁵² from the cold.
 4 *ina meš-la-te šá* ITL.ZIZ⁵³ ⁴ (Thus,) we shall send them in the middle
 5 *ni-iš-pur bi-is* of Shebat (XI) so that they can haul them
 6 *a-na* ITL.ŠE *i-šad-da-du-niš-šú-nu* and travel all through Adar (XII).
 7 *il-la-ku-u-ni*
 8 *il-la-ka ina šá* ITL.BARAG ⁸ Then they will be able to reach (their)
 9 *i-kaš-šá-du-u-ni* destination in Nisan (I).

in the Assyrian scholarly letter SAA 10 229:9), and *kuttimmu* (LÚ.KUG.DÍM in SAA 11 155:5). Cf. SAA 10 361 r.3: *ši-id-di-im-ma* “along the roadside” (cf. Luukko 1997: 33 n. 8). SAA 10 361 and 363 (in which the verb *karāmu* is used in the same way as in ABL 302, see note 51) are written by Mar-Issar, Esarhaddon’s agent in Babylonia.

⁴⁹ Cf. SAAB 9 102:6-e.7: *ina šá-bi* ITI *ša* ITL.ZIZ, translated there as “within the month of ‘the month’ Šabātu.”

⁵⁰ Note the use of the first person plural: “we shall send.” Mostly, Assurbanipal uses the first person singular in his letters, however, cf. BM 132980:14–20.

⁵¹ The clause *ki-i* LÚ*.GİR.AD₄ / *ik-rim-u-ni* (ll. 11–12) is difficult to interpret because of the use of the sign AD₄ and the verb *karāmu*: it is – so far – the only attestation of AD₄ in Neo-Assyrian sources (cf. AD₄ = “(to be) crippled” = Akk. *kubbulu* (ePSD), Ass. *kabbulu*; [G]IR.AD₄ = *še-pa gu-bu-la-tu[m]* Ká-gal I col. vi 314 (= MSL 13: 230); [L]Ú.GİR.AD₄, [SAL].GİR.AD₄ in the Lu-list STT 385 viii 9a–b (= MSL 12: 237 viii 46–47)); it remains unclear whether a singular individual or several persons are meant. As a professional title, the designation *cripple* for a man handling horses may be explained by the fact that working with horses implies a high risk of physical injuries and many of the grooms and handlers would thus have broken e.g. a leg at one time or another, possibly leaving them *crippled*. However, this interpretation is uncertain. Moreover, scholars do not agree as to how to translate the verb *karāmu* in Neo-Assyrian (see Zaccagnini 1994: 36–42, Fales 2000b). In this text, I prefer to stick to the lexical equivalence of *karāmu* with *šabātu*, and translate the verb with “to hold back, detain” (as, e.g., in SAA 10 363 r.11: *a-na* MUL.GIŠ.GIGIR *lu-u ik-ri-im* “(Its interpretation will remain the same,) even if it *holds back* to the Chariot” (dated 669-IV-1, maybe referring to the retrograde, backward motion of Jupiter in the direction of the Chariot later that year); SAA 13 12 r.12: *li-li-sa-a-ni l[i]-ik-ri-mu* “that they should *hold back* the kettledrums”). I tentatively translate this clause as “that the *crippled detained (the consignment)*,” implying that the forwarding of the horses is delayed by the *crippled (groom(s)/handler(s))*.

⁵² The sentence *ina dan-ni-te šá ku-uš-šu* / *ina ku-uš-ši-im-ma* / *ina ku-uš-šu i-mut-tú* (r. 1–3) is conspicuous because of the triple use of the word *kuššu* “cold, coldness, cold temperature, cold weather, winter; ague, chill, shivering” (AEAD: 52). The first part *ina dan-ni-te šá ku-uš-šu* corresponds largely with Esarhaddon’s *dan-na-at* EN.TE.NA, “the dead/severity of winter”; in the second part *ina ku-uš-ši-im-ma*, the enclitic particle *-ma* emphasizes the extreme coldness of the period. One could translate this thus as: “In the dead of winter, when it is very, very cold, they would die from the cold.”

⁵³ Cf. *šúm-mu qar-ḫu* / *ina* UGU-ḫi-šú : *la iq-ru-ḫu* / *ina meš-la-a-ti ša* ITL.ZIZ / *nu-ra-ma* “If ice does not form on it, we can leave it in mid-Shebat (XI)” (SAA 5 272 r.2–5).

This difficult letter concerns the delivery of review horses to Nabû-šar-aḫḫešu. Presumably, the latter had complained to the king that the consignment of horses had not yet arrived. Assurbanipal begins his reply with the promise that they will send the horses *along the way* within the month of Adar (XII). Then, the king adds that they had already sent word to Nabû-šar-aḫḫešu in the beginning of Shebat (XI) to inform him about a delay due to the *crippled* – but most probably this message crossed paths with Nabû-šar-aḫḫešu’s complaint. Moreover, the king argues that it is too cold and thus too risky to send the horses away now.⁵⁴ Yet, the temperature usually improves slightly in February, therefore, by leaving after the middle of Shebat, the worst cold would have been over – the cold the horses could die from – so that Assurbanipal reasoned that travelling with horses would be safe again.⁵⁵ In this way, the journey could begin two weeks earlier than first scheduled, reducing the accumulated delay.

3. CONCLUSION

Letters and royal inscriptions show that the dangers of snow and the rigours of winter were, in general, well known to the Assyrians. Nevertheless, now and again they had to learn from experience, like Nabû-belū-ka”in who lost several men and horses in the snow on his way to the capital – possibly his first encounter with snow. Sometimes it is better to delay a transaction than to risk lives of people and animals.

On the other hand, snow can make a battle scene seem more epic, more heroic. The depicted extreme circumstances at Mount Wauš, where it snows day and night, winter and summer, and frostbite occurs, make Sargon’s defeat of the Urartian army sound even more spectacular. His successor, Sennacherib, however, displayed a different attitude toward snow when he was confronted with it during his seventh campaign against Elam. His decision to retreat out of fear for the rain and snow, though most probably an act of self-preservation, can be interpreted as an act of wisdom and responsibility with regard to the lives of his troops and horses. His son Esarhaddon, however, may have seen it as an act of cowardice, as he claims not to have feared the snow on his way to the throne, and thus would take a different ideological stance than his father, and make a better king – but then he did not have much choice.

⁵⁴ Note that the letter must have been written in the first half of Shebat, perhaps just before the middle of the month when the horses would be sent *en route*.

⁵⁵ Van Driel (1992: 48) mentions the Neo-Babylonian letter TCL 9 88 by Nabû-aḫḫe-iddina to his lord Nabû-belšunu. The sender advises his lord not to send the oxen away before the 20th of Shebat (XI) or else they would become emaciated (*i-maṭ-tu-ú*, l. 13) on the way and their condition would only get worse (*pa-ni-šú-nu / i’-bi-’i-’šú*, ll. 14–15). However, the same letter continues: *ina itl.ziz UD-mu / i-pa-áš-šar-ma / ul i-maṭ-tu-ú*, “In the month Shebat (XI) the weather will ease and (the oxen) will not be so emaciated.” (r.1–3, CAD P: 239).

Finally, Assurbanipal considered the weather when he ordered the horses of the review to be sent on their way immediately after the coldest period of the year, so they would not die of the cold and arrive at their destination without further delay.