

Assyrian “Control Points” in the Domination of the Southern Levant in the Reign of Tiglath-Pileser III

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[Assyria took control of the Levant under its king, Tiglath-pileser III, in the years 744-732 BCE. During this initial period of Assyrian control, Assyrian administrators established a ramified network of influence, extending Assyrian control over nominally-independent states in the southern Levant. A key player in establishing this network of Assyrian control was Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur. The article shows how he established points of political and economic control over states far from Assyrian centres, such as Moab and Ashdod. He used his base in Phoenicia to spread Assyrian influence further into the territory to be dominated.]

Keywords: Assyria, Phoenicia, Tiglath-pileser III, Neo-Assyrian Empire, Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur, Ashdod, Šimarra, networks of influence.

1. *Introduction: Oil Stains vs Networks*

This brief study will explore, by examining a well-known series of administrative documents, the mechanisms of Assyrian control in the area of the Levant during the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (reigned 744-727; control of the Levant began approximately 740 BCE). During this period, Assyrian control was exerted, not by proceeding methodically to take control of contiguous territory in a gradual manner, but rather by establishing points of political and economic control and using these to spread Assyrian influence further into the territory to be dominated.

This develops the view Liverani (1988:86) expressed, when he rejected the “oil-stain” metaphor as a way of understanding Assyrian expansion in the ninth century BCE. Assyria did not aim to expand by conquering contiguous territory (expanding like an oil stain expands). Instead, Assyrian control was extended and consolidated by “a thickening of pre-existing networks, or by setting up other networks even at great distance.” These networks of control extended from one point of control to another, and were not necessarily contiguous. “The empire,” Liverani argued, “is not a spread of land but a network of communications over which material goods are carried.” As we will see in the following, this formulation holds true not only for the ninth-century Assyrian expansion into the upper Euphrates, but also for its eighth-century expansion into the southern Levant. Geographic contiguity was not always the key element in developing the network of control. As we illustrate below, these networks depended on factors such as trade routes, power imbalances, and local strongmen. Therefore, the network of communication did not only carry material goods, but also transmitted intangible political influence.

This political influence was backed up, of course, by the often-unmentioned but always-present reality of Assyrian military power. Assyria leveraged its power to expand its ramified networks of influence, without regard for geographic contiguity.

This article will focus on the shrewd actions of the Assyrian administrators, who as Parker (2001:84) noted, followed the Assyrian army in order to establish strongholds in the newly-conquered regions. The new and interesting point that we see in the following study is how these administrators extended their influence through a series of networks that had no regard for geographic contiguity. However, because these administrators operated in the historical and political context of Assyrian conquests, it is necessary to first survey the Assyrian campaigns of 740-732 in the Levant.

2. Historical Context

The first stage of Tiglath-pileser's expansion to the west was the three-year campaign culminating in the defeat and transformation into a province of the important and powerful kingdom of Arpad in northern Syria in 742-740 BCE (Kahn 2007; see eponym chronicle discussion in Tadmor 1994: 233). He then defeated the kingdom of Unqi/Pattina on the lower Orontes in 738. He was able to parley this victory into domination of much of northern Syria and its coast, without the need for further battles. Out of the ruins of the kingdom of Unqi/Pattina, the province of Kullania (Biblical Calneh) was created. Furthermore, the province of Hatarikka (Bib. Hadrach) was created at this time in the interior of Northern Syria (Tadmor 1994:235) and the province of Šimirra south of Kullania along the seacoast (Tadmor 1994:176-7, *Summ. Insc.* 8, line 9'; Tadmor and Yamada 2011:126 *Inscription* 48, line 9'; Yamada 2008: 298; Bagg 2011: 215-217).

Besides establishing these provinces in the Syrian interior and coast, Tiglath-pileser was able to further extend his influence, again without further battles, by receiving tribute from kingdoms ranging from Gurgum in what is now southern Turkey, to Samaria, in the southern Levant (Tadmor 1994: 265-8, with text references there to "the early lists"). This tribute resulted from the battles mentioned above, and did not involve any further military encounters.

The impressive results of the 738 campaign allowed Tiglath-pileser to spend 737, 736, and 735 in other parts of the empire, and only in 734 did he return to campaign against Philistia and the Egyptian border (Tadmor 1994:235). This campaign again resulted in kings who were not attacked deciding to submit and remit tribute. These included the kings of Ammon, Moab and Edom in Transjordan, and Judah, Gaza and Ashkelon in Cisjordan (Tadmor 1994:265-8, *Summ. Ins.* 7, lines 10'-11'; Tadmor and Yamada 2011, *Inscription* 47, lines 10'-11'; note that other kingdoms also remitted tribute, but their names are missing from the broken tablet.) In 733-2, a further campaign against Damascus and the kingdom of Israel took place, a campaign which also included replacing the king of Ashkelon with a more pro-Assyrian king (Tadmor 1994:268, and text references there).

This brief summary shows how military campaigns resulted in reducing many areas that were not attacked to the status of client kingdoms. As seen above, the kingdoms who chose to remit tribute were often not directly contiguous with the attacked kingdom.

3. Strongholds and Administrators as Control Points

Relations with the tributary kingdoms had to be cultivated and extended, and the process of extending Assyrian influence in these kingdoms fell, especially in the initial stages, to Assyrian administrators. These were often positioned in strongholds in the newly-conquered regions, as

Parker (2001:84-86) implied. These strongholds were located in cities in which the Assyrians thought that Assyrian officials would be secure, enjoy a reasonable degree of local support, and be able to tax and direct local trade while also coordinating further military or administrative expansion of Assyrian influence. Subsequently, *qēpu* officials were assigned to supervise certain troublesome vassals; see Dubovský 2012 for a survey of their role.

The shrewd actions of Assyrian administrators in these strongholds were one important means of ensuring the loyalty of the tributary states. These administrators deployed their political influence to extend Assyrian control from the strongholds in which they resided to geographically-discontiguous, nominally independent kingdoms. The political leadership in these kingdoms feared displeasing the administrators, and sought them out to adjudicate disputes they had with neighbouring kingdoms. They effectively invited the Assyrians to exercise influence in their region, expecting, for whatever reason, that they would benefit from expanded Assyrian influence. This influence extended as far south as Ashdod and Moab, and was mediated through Assyrian administrators, resident along the Lebanese coast and possibly in the Damascus area. This is demonstrated by the letters of Assyrian administrator Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur, who seems to have been resident first in Sumur on the Lebanese coast and later possibly in Damascus. We lack precise information as to the official function filled by this administrator; his title does not appear in the documents we have. However, as it appears that he supervised Assyrian *qēpu* officials (Yamada 299), he seems to have had a high rank, and he is often considered to be a governor. As we will see, however, his influence extended far beyond the bounds of a specific province, and he might be considered a sort of “regional high delegate of the king.” (More fanciful descriptions, such as “regional high poo-bah” cannot be excluded, poo-bah being defined as “a person holding many private or public offices; a person in high position or great influence.”)¹

4. *The Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur Corpus and its Geographic Extent*

The corpus of Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur’s letters has been extensively studied (Postgate 1974: 390-393, Parker 2000, Saggs 2001, Yamada 2008, Luukko 2012, Na’aman 2018). But relatively little attention has been paid to the rather wide geographic reach of Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur’s influence and its implications for Assyrian methods of control. Dating from the reign of Tiglath-pilser III, and discovered at Nimrud, the corpus consists of up to eleven letters (currently labelled SAA XIX 22-32),² of which five (22, 23, 25, 27, 28) contain the name of the sender.³ Two more letters (24 and 26) can be assigned to Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur on the basis of the contents. Four letters (29, 30, 31, 32) are distinguished from the rest of the corpus on two grounds: a) they contain a shorter form of the name: Qurdi-Aššur; and b) they begin with the greeting “good health to the king my lord.”

Letters 22 and 23 mention Tyre and Sidon, letter 22 also mentions Kašpuna, and letter 25 mentions Samsimuruna (known to be in Phoenicia). Letter 22 is particularly important. It shows how Assyria “developed a tight monopoly on some aspects of Phoenician trade,” (Fales 2017:234); Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur was responsible for enforcing rules restricting who was allowed to benefit from

1. Merriam-Webster dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pooh-bah>, accessed 21-1-21.

2. Only references to SAA numbers are given in the body of the article. For ease of reference, here are the correspondences to the letters discussed: Letter 22: ND 2715, CTN 5 t31a; 23: ND 2686, CTN 5 t30b; 24: ND 2430, CTN 5 t30e; 25: ND 2370; CTN 5 t32b; 26: ND 2737, CTN t33b; 27: ND 2713, CTN 5 t36d; 28: ND 2662, CTN 5 t19c; 29: ND 2773, CTN 5 t31b; 30: ND 2716, CTN 5 t32a; 31: ND 2477, CTN 5 t44e; 32: ND 2376, CTN 5 p. 245.

3. In SAA XIX 28, the end of the name lāmur must be restored, as Saggs 2001: 153 and Yamada 2008: 302 noted.

this trade. The letter reports on how Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur fulfilled a royal order to “speak good words” to the king of Tyre; from the context, it is clear that Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur was told to issue trade concessions to the king of Tyre. He reports that he collects a customs duty (Akk. *miksu*) from wood brought down from Mount Lebanon to the ports in the area of Sidon and Tyre. He does not allow its sale to Egyptians or Philistines, presumably because the political leadership associated with these traders opposed Assyrian expansion. The letter concludes with a discussion of construction and settlement in Kašpuna. Based on these three letters, Yamada (2008:309) concludes that Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur “was probably the governor of Šimirra province, organized on the Syrian coast south of the Orontes river in 738, and apparently enlarged later southwards to include the city of Kashpuna and part of the mainland territory of Tyre in 734–732.” This view of Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur’s position has been accepted in scholarship (Luukko 2012: il; Na’aman 2018).

But the geographical range of Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur’s influence extends far beyond the Šimirra province or, indeed, the Phoenician coast. Letter 27 mentions captives from Tabal and Que in Cilicia. Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur was clearly responsible for these captives; we see this from the letter which mentions that the palace wrote to him concerning them. Why was Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur responsible for these captives? They may have been transiting through the Syrian coast. However, the letter also mentions Turušpâ (in the Lake Van area), in the context of these captives’ journeys. This suggests a range of activity for Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur far beyond the Syrian coast.

Furthermore, letter 28 speaks of a document received by Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur from the king of Ashdod, who claimed that his control over three cities was confirmed by a treaty with the Assyrian king. The letter appears to complain that this control is challenged by a different local potentate (Aster 2018). The reading “Ashdod” in this text (Luukko 2012:35) has been challenged by Na’aman (2018:43), who argued that Ashdod was located “far south of the territories where Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur operated.” He therefore preferred the reading “Arvad” for the name of the city of the king who wrote to Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur, of which only the last syllables (*da-a-a*) are preserved. The restoration “Arvad” was also proposed by Yamada 2008:302. But this argument ignores two powerful counter-arguments.

In the first place, letter 27 shows that Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur operated outside of the narrow confines of the Syrian/Lebanese coast. Thus, it is unreasonable to limit his activity to the area around the Šimirra province.

In the second place, the cities mentioned in this letter, Qadarua (*qa-da-ru¹-a*), Lidu (*li-i-du*), and Hadidu (*ha¹-di-du*)⁴ are all located along a well-attested road connecting Ashdod to the main international route running north-south past Apek in central Palestine. Qadarua is ancient Gederoth, modern Tel Qatara, located just north of the modern city of Gedera; Lidu is ancient and modern Lod; and Hadidu is ancient Hadid, modern Tel Hadid. No identifications for the preserved city names have been proposed in the area of Arvad, and no suitable names appear in Wardini 2002, in Bagg 2007, or in relevant maps of southern Syria or northern Lebanon. Therefore, it seems very difficult to connect the letter to Arvad.

Na’aman (2018:43) further argues that it is questionable whether the Assyrians had “conquered Ashdod” at the point when this letter was written. They certainly did not conquer Ashdod in the period when the letter was written, which Na’aman sees as “the period after 738”,

4. In Luukko 2012:35, the name of the last city appears as [x x]x-di-du. However, subsequent collation of the tablet by Luukko has shown that the reading of the last city should be *ha¹-di-du*, with a partially preserved *ha* sign preceding the *di* sign. This reading is now presented on the SAA online website.

and Yamada (2008:303) similarly sees as “c.737-734.” Both Arvad and the kingdoms around Ashdod (Ashkelon and Judah) are recorded as becoming tributary to Assyria for the first time in the list in Summ. Insc. 7, which, as noted above, was dated by Tadmor 1994: 268 to 734 BCE. Ashdod itself became tributary to Assyria at some point in the reign of Tiglath-pileser III. This is evident from SAA XIX letter 8, which was sent by Ullulayu, the son of Tiglath-pileser III who later reigned as Shalmaneser V, and records the journey of tribute-bearing ambassadors from Ashdod. Thus, the issue of an Assyrian conquest of Ashdod in this period is irrelevant; Ashdod was tributary to Assyria in this period, as was Arvad. For the reasons noted above, the case for the reading “Ashdod” in SAA XIX letter 28 remains far stronger than that for reading Arvad.

We therefore see that there is a wide geographic extent to the areas in which Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur exercised influence. No geographic contiguity can be found between the Tyre-Sidon area and the Ashdod area, just as no geographic contiguity can be found between the Tyre-Sidon area and Turuṣpâ. Assyrian influence did not expand following the principle of geographic contiguity, like an oil stain, but rather along ramified networks of influence, which Assyrian administrators worked hard to develop. The network of influence connecting the Tyre-Sidon area to the Ashdod area is clear; both are Mediterranean ports, and letter 22, cited above, mentioned Philistine traders in Sidon. Less is known about the network of influence connecting Tyre or Sidon to Turuṣpâ, a major Urartean city on the eastern shores of Lake Van.

Luukko noted the wide geographic range of Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur’s activity and pointed out that large areas were annexed to Assyria after Tiglath-pileser’s Syrian campaign of 738, and the number of governors was initially low. As a result, “they may have been responsible for vast areas” (Luukko 2012: il). But it appears that the vast areas over which Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur had influence did not result from an unplanned “personnel shortage” among the governor class in Assyria but is rather an expression of Assyrian practice in expanding the empire. This practice continued after 738, and it is known to us rather earlier, from the ninth-century material Liverani analyzed.

As in the case of Tiglath-pileser’s expansion in Syria, Assyrian influence expanded not only to territory contiguous to that conquered, but rather by leveraging limited military conquests to dominate many unconquered states. Thus, the Assyrian practice of expanding influence without regard to geographic contiguity characterizes both the activities of Tiglath-pileser III and those of Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur.

In support of this point, we should note the wide range of the type of activities Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur is said to engage in. In letter 22, he is active in collecting taxes on timber to be exported, and in restricting the sale of timber to parties hostile to Assyria, while also establishing a fort, bringing deportees to Kašpuna and provisioning them with water. These activities go beyond what is expected of a typical provincial governor, leading Yamada (2008: 310) to conclude that Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur held the title of *rab-kāri* in addition to being governor. But it is also possible that the range of Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur’s activities resulted from his being given a more wide-ranging task than that of a provincial governor: to expand Assyrian influence throughout the Levant, by whatever means necessary.

5. Letters 29-32: Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur in Syria?

Letters 29 – 32 clearly have a different character from the other letters in this corpus, as Yamada 2008: 310 and Na’aman have noted. Because they contain only the name Qurdi-Aššur, and contain a unique opening formula, and because several of them deal with Syria, Yamada mooted the possibility that Qurdi-Aššur was a different personality than Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur. Luukko 2012:

xlvi is inclined to doubt this, and Na'aman 2018 suggests that all the letters were written by the same official, but that he was appointed to a position in Syria after his position in Šimirra.

While I am inclined to regard Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur and Qurdi-Aššur as the same person, the question of his identity does not materially affect the argument here. Both in the letters mentioning Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur, and in those mentioning Qurdi-Aššur, we find the Assyrian administrator(s) extending Assyrian influence to a wide range of territory, without regard for whether this territory was geographically contiguous with the area in which they seem to have been most active.

The letter that most clearly locates Qurdi-Aššur in Syria is letter 30, which clearly mentions the town of Helbon, and discusses Qurdi-Aššur's disposition of the orchards there. Mentioned in Ezekiel 27: 18 and in Neo-Babylonian texts (Yamada 2008: 310), Helbon is clearly modern Halbun, located 20 km north of Damascus. But even if we accept the understanding of Na'aman 2018 that the first lines of this letter refer to Qurdi-Aššur's appointment to a position in the Damascus area, it is clear that he exercised influence in areas far from Damascus, just as we found in the letters mentioning Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur.

Like letter 28, discussed above (mentioning Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur and Ashdod), letter 29 (which mentions Qurdi-Aššur) refers to a dispute between two less powerful kingdoms, located far from the seat of the Assyrian administrator, which was submitted for Assyrian adjudication. This letter warns the Assyrian king of the impending arrival of a Moabite messenger. This messenger, or the Moabite king, clearly took pains to consult with Qurdi-Aššur about the complaint leading to the dispatch of the message. The message records "that the Qedarites went straight away to Moab and defeated it" (Luukko 2012:35). The translation "Qedarites" for Akk. KUR. *gi-di-ra-a-a* was criticized by Eph'al (1982: 92). The location was identified by Mazar (1957: 237-8) as Roman-era Gadora in Transjordan (modern Ain Jadur, near As-Salt). Yamada (2008: 310) opines that Qurdi-Aššur may have become aware of the Moabite messenger's mission because the Moabite messenger's route passed near Qurdi-Aššur's location "somewhere in inner Syria." This may be, but it is clear that Qurdi-Aššur is not simply reporting on a passing potentate. He is aware of the contents of the complaint and has investigated it (lines 11ff). This shows that as in letter 28, the Assyrian administrator actively tries to make Assyria into the arbiter of disputes between smaller polities in the region. This is an effective way of extending Assyrian influence, and of causing these smaller states to recognize Assyria as the overlord and suzerain.

Clearly, Moab was not territorially contiguous with the place of residence of Qurdi-Aššur, be it in Šimirra or in inner Syria. But the Assyrian administrator actively sought to extend Assyrian influence to Moab. He felt that it was in Assyria's interest to become the arbiter of such disputes, just as the Moabite leader portrayed in the letter feels that Assyrian intervention will benefit him. Rather than fighting back against the purported aggression, he chose to complain to Assyria. This clearly shows an expectation that Assyria was interested or willing to adjudicate conflicts in the region, and also shows an expectation by Moab that Assyria would come down on Moab's side in this conflict.

The Moabite leadership's expectation that it would receive Assyrian support was likely promoted by Assyria. It would have been wise for Assyria to encourage client states to believe that they would receive something tangible and positive in return for their tribute payments. (On the possible benefits client states received from Assyria, see Baruchi-Unna 2018). This belief, chimerical or otherwise, was clearly in Assyria's interest, and produced a further incentive for tribute payments.

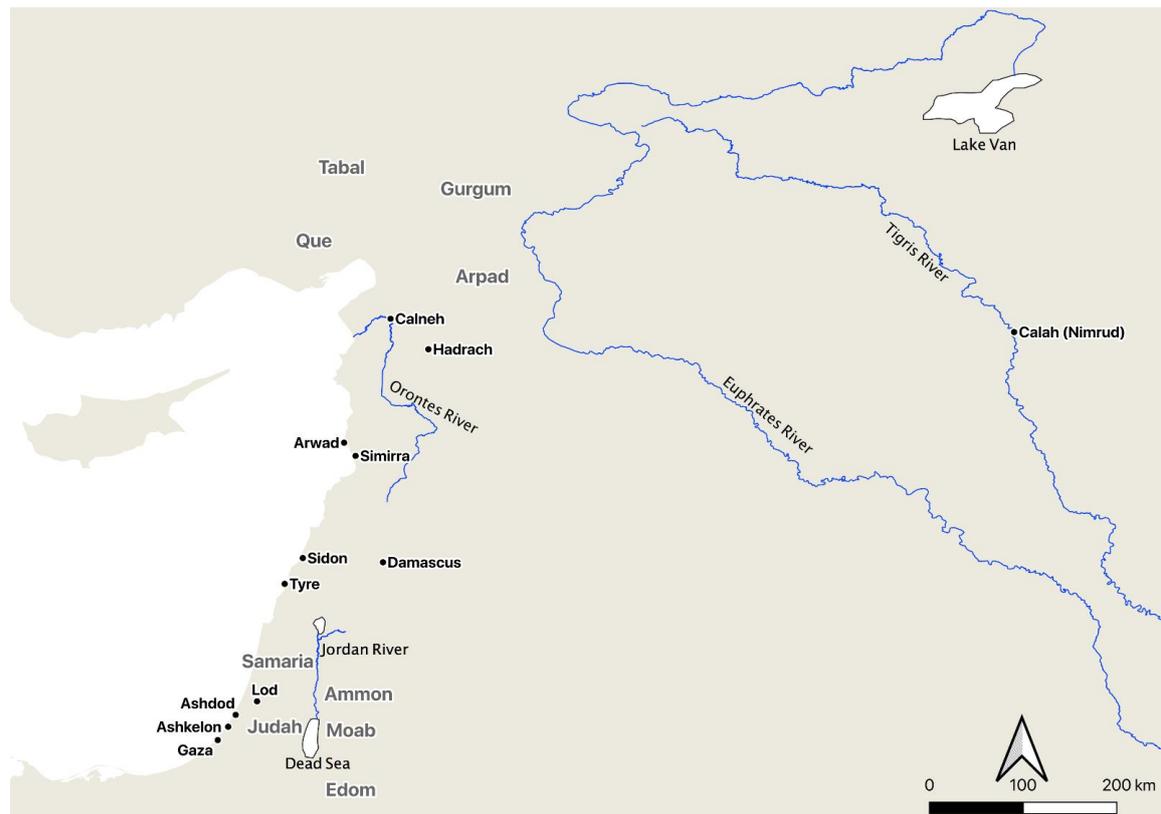
6. Conclusion

The Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur corpus clearly shows how an Assyrian administrator, ensconced after the Assyrian conquest at a location in Phoenicia, and possibly at a location in Syria, could exercise great influence over points far to the south of his location of residence. Geographic contiguity did not matter. What mattered, as Liverani (1988:86) noted, was setting up Assyrian channels of influence over territory, and thickening existing channels of influence. This was done by drawing political and economic leaders into the belief that Assyrian influence mattered. Assyrian administrators’ residences served as control points, but their areas of influence extended to territory far beyond those contiguous with their territory.

Of course, such ramified and far-flung networks could only exist when Assyrian administrators were relatively sparsely-distributed. In later stages of the Assyrian expansion, when there were Assyrian governors in the southern Levant, a governor who attempted to extend his influence to territories not contiguous with his own might find himself in conflict with the governor of the contiguous territory. Each governor sought to maximize his own influence, partly for his own pecuniary advantage, as we see from documents such as SAA I 172, where different governors seem to dispute the right to tax certain towns.

But in the reign of Tiglath-pileser, when Samaria and Ashdod had not yet become Assyrian provinces (as they did in the reign of Sargon II), the Assyrian administrators in Phoenicia and perhaps in Syria handled complaints from the southern Levant, and worked hard to expand Assyrian influence to that region.

Assyria viewed Phoenicia as having much greater economic importance to Assyria than other parts of the southern Levant, as shown by documents such as SAA XIX, Letter 22, discussed above (and see further in Fales 2017: 233-235). Perhaps for this reason, Assyria took pains to ensconce an administrator in this region at the earliest opportunity, and he handled complaints and expanded influence among other regional potentates.



Map of locations mentioned in this article, prepared by James Mclellan, Bar-Ilan University

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