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COLLOQUIA ANTIQUA

— 28 —

ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY OF URARTU (BIAINILI)

*Dedicated to the memory of
Prof. Altan Çilingiroğlu*

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URARTIAN FOREIGN POLICY: THE SOUTH

Karen RADNER

Abstract

This chapter deals with Urartu's relationship with its southern neighbour: the Assyrian empire, by far its most powerful rival. After briefly presenting the sources, we discuss (A) the period from the 860s to 820 BC when Urartian state expansion is countered by Assyrian incursions into its territory; (B) the poorly attested period from the 810s to 782 BC when Urartu and Assyria seem to have avoided direct confrontation with each other; (C) the period from 781 to 744 BC when Urartu offensively encroached on the Assyrian sphere of interest in south-western Anatolia and north-western Iran; (D) the period from 743 to 735 BC when Assyria reasserted its military dominance; (E) the period from 734 to 708 BC when Urartu lost its influence in south-western Anatolia and north-western Iran; (F) the entente between Urartu and Assyria from 707 to the 660s BC; and finally (G) the period of the 650s and 640s when Urartu had to acknowledge and accept Assyrian sovereignty.

To the south of Urartu lie the territories controlled by the Assyrian empire, by far its most powerful rival, and this chapter will therefore deal with Urartu's relationship with Assyria. Centred on northern Iraq, this state dominated the political landscape of the Middle East from the 9th century BC onwards and controlled regions between the eastern Mediterranean coast and Central Iran either directly (as provinces with centrally appointed governors) or indirectly (as client states headed by local rulers bound by treaty to their Assyrian overlord). Although the centres Turushpa and Nineveh, the Assyrian capital of the 7th century BC, were situated at a distance of only about 240 km from each other as the crow flies, the soaring peaks of the Taurus main ridge, with altitudes in excess of 3000 m, provided a bulwark between them.

For most of their shared history, long-term relations between Urartu and Assyria were openly hostile and punctuated by encounters on the battlefield, as both states sought to expand into the same strategically and economically important regions along the Taurus and Zagros mountain ranges. In between, there were periods of calm: not as the result of peace treaties but due to mutual avoidance after inconclusive yet costly wars, as the two rivals were remarkably evenly matched in their offensive and defensive power. After one such period of avoidance during the first half of the 7th century, we find the relationship

markedly changed, for reasons not explicitly documented in the available sources, and the two states were now engaged in direct diplomatic contact. At some point between 646 and 642 BC, Urartu even accepted Assyria as its sovereign power and entered into a client relationship.

THE SOURCES AND THE CHRONOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF RELATIONS WITH ASSYRIA

Textual sources form the backbone for any study of the political relationship between Urartu and the Assyrian empire. Texts relevant to our topic are relatively numerous, but very unevenly distributed. Generally speaking, the Assyrian material is not only much more numerous but also far more diverse in nature than the Urartian sources. The relevant Urartian and Assyrian texts can be divided into two groups: official inscriptions and archival materials, usually from the context of state administration.

The relevant official accounts preserved in the royal inscriptions cover the period from the mid-9th to the 7th century in Assyria (from the reign of Assurnasirpal II to Assurbanipal) and the period from the late 9th to the 7th century in Urartu (beginning with the reign of Sarduri son of Lutibri [= 'Sarduri I']). Their availability reflects how active a given ruler was in constructing or renovating temples and palaces (where royal inscriptions were displayed or, in Assyria, also deposited in the building foundations) and in creating monuments such as statues, steles and rock reliefs. Documentation for individual rulers is linked not only to the length of their reign but also to the chances of archaeological recovery. On the one hand, not all kings commissioned suitable building projects during their lifetime and as a rule, kings only report their own achievements, never those of their predecessors. On the other hand, not all buildings or monuments have been discovered. The many recent discoveries of Urartian royal inscriptions in Turkey and Iran are an indication of the intensified research of recent years. Because their inscriptions were composed and produced at suitable moments during their lifetime, there is never a complete sequence of the deeds of Assyrian and Urartian rulers available. Moreover, as a rule, the accounts in royal inscriptions, be they Assyrian¹ or Urartian,² only mention the enemy in circumstances that present the commissioner of the inscription in a favourable light, i.e. normally as the victor in a military encounter or the recipient of a

¹ Grayson 1991; 1996; Grayson and Novotny 2012; 2014; Frame 2020; Fuchs 1994; Leichty 2011; Novotny and Jeffers 2018; Tadmor and Yamada 2011.

² *CTU*. Lemmatised editions of all texts contained in *CTU*, with English translations by B. Christiansen, are offered in the *Electronic Corpus of Urartian Texts: oracc.museum.upenn.edu/ecut*.

diplomatic mission. This obvious bias needs to be taken into account. Assyrian inscriptions tend to give concrete (year) dates for the events reported which provides the backbone for the chronological reconstruction of Assyrian-Urartian interaction. This information generally matches and on occasion enhances the data provided by the Assyrian Eponym Chronicles, which note Urartu as a frequent destination of military campaigns between 830 and 714 BC as well as Urartu's defeat in battle in 743 BC.³

In addition, the architectural decoration of several palaces and temples in the Assyrian heartland depict military interaction with Urartu. The earliest depiction dates already to the reign of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BC) and therefore predates the available textual evidence. Reliefs from the reign of Assurbanipal of Assyria (668–630 BC) show Urartian diplomats at the Assyrian court.

Archival materials such as letters, reports and lists were not written with the intention of impressing contemporaries and future generations and therefore lack the bias of official inscriptions. However, only very little material is currently known from Urartu and the still poorly understood clay tablets excavated in Bastam in Iran, Karmir-Blur in Armenia, and several sites in Turkey⁴ cannot enlighten us about Urartian foreign policy. The Assyrian material is more numerous and more relevant but only available for certain periods. The letters from the state correspondence of the Assyrian kings Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BC) and Sargon II (721–705 BC) with their top officials, excavated in the Assyrian royal palaces of Kalhu (modern Nimrud) and Nineveh,⁵ are by far the most important body of sources. They demonstrate in particular that Assyria kept close tabs on Urartu by running an extensive intelligence network in the frontier region and even inside Urartian territories.⁶ Even in the time of the far more peaceful relationship during the reign of Esarhaddon (680–669 BC), a few fragmentary oracle queries illustrate the ongoing efforts to assess Urartian strength and strategy.⁷

The following table gives a survey of key sources providing dated evidence for encounters between Assyria and Urartu.⁸ As will be immediately apparent, our knowledge is very dependent on the Assyrian material. On the Urartian side, the annalistic inscriptions of Argishti I⁹ and Sarduri II¹⁰ provide evidence that is datable due to its links to the Assyrian material.

³ Millard 1994.

⁴ *CTU* IV, pp. 121–206.

⁵ Dietrich 2003; Fuchs and Parpola 2001; Lanfranchi and Parpola 1990; Luukko 2012; Parpola 1987.

⁶ Dubovsky 2006.

⁷ Starr 1990, nos. 18, 19, 24, 205.

⁸ For text references, see Fuchs 2012, 135–38.

⁹ Horhor Annals; *CTU* A8-3.

¹⁰ Hazine Kapısı Annals; *CTU* A9-1.

Table 1: I = Inscription; EC = Eponym Chronicles.

<i>Uartian sources</i>		<i>Assyrian sources</i>	
	860s	Gate decoration – Assurnasirpal II	Battle at Mt Urina.
	859	I – Shalmaneser III	Assyrian attack on Uartian territories, then successful siege of the royal fortress Sugunia.
	856	I – Shalmaneser III	Assyrian attack on Uartian territories, then battle against forces led by Arramu of Uartu near the royal fortress Arzashkun.
	844	I – Shalmaneser III	Assyrian attack on territories of Arramu of Uartu in the region between the Tigris headwaters and the Murat Su.
	830	EC; I – Shalmaneser III	Assyrian attack on Uartian territories in the Murat Su basin, led by commander-in-chief Dayan-Ashur, then battle against forces led by Sarduri of Uartu.
	ca. 820	I – Shamshi-Adad V	Assyrian attack on territories of Ishpuini of Uartu led by chief eunuch Mutarris-Ashur.
	781	EC	‘Against Uartu’
	780	EC	‘Against Uartu’
	779	EC	‘Against Uartu’
	778	EC	‘Against Uartu’
	776	EC	‘Against Uartu’
I – Argishti I	774	EC; I – commander-in-chief Shamshi-ilu	Uartian attack on Assyrian territories, then battle against Assyrian forces led by commander-in-chief Shamshi-ilu.
I – Argishti I	773		Uartian attack on Assyrian territories.
I – Sarduri II	754		Uartian victory in battle against Assyrian forces led by king Ashur-nerari V in region of Arpad.
	743	EC; I – Tiglath-pileser III	Assyrian victory in battle against Uartian forces led by king Sarduri in region of Kummuhu.
	735	EC; I – Tiglath-pileser III	Assyrian raid into Uartian territories, then unsuccessful siege of royal fortress Turushpa.
	719	I – Sargon	Assyrian-Uartian war by proxy in Mannea begins.
	714	EC; I – Sargon	Battle against Uartian and allied forces led by king Rusa at Mt Uaush.
	672	I – Esarhaddon	After the conquest of Shupria, Esarhaddon orders the return of all Uartian fugitives in Shupria to king Rusa.
	652	I – Assurbanipal	Uartian delegates sent by king Rusa participate in Assyrian victory celebrations at Arbail after the defeat of Elam.
	ca. 646–42	I – Assurbanipal	King Sarduri enters a client relationship with Assurbanipal and delivers tribute.

URARTU'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

The discussion of the available sources will have made clear that any attempt to analyse Urartian foreign policy against its southern neighbour has no other option than to rely very heavily on Assyrian sources. These materials focus prominently on aggressive or defensive military acts and only on rare occasions reference any other form of political action directly.

However, raids and battles were just one manifestation of the overwhelmingly hostile relationship between the two superpowers. References to client states changing sides in the Assyrian sources are relatively frequent (usually mentioned when justifying a subsequent attack on their territory). The mountain regions between the headwaters of the Tigris and those of the Lower Zab, in the corridor between the provincial borders of Urartu and Assyria, were home to a string of small kingdoms that were allowed, by either side, to remain nominally independent.¹¹ Urartu competed with Assyria for the favour of these smaller states, especially in the regions on the south-western and south-eastern boundaries of Urartu's territory, at the modern border between Syria and Turkey along the Euphrates and to the south-west of Lake Urmia in Iran, respectively.

In the following, we will assess Urartu's relationship with the Assyrian empire, focusing on changes in attitude and policy. It goes without saying that much must remain speculative.

860s–820 BC: URARTIAN EXPANSION AND ASSYRIAN INCURSIONS

Urartian state formation and its subsequent consolidation direction led to direct conflict with Assyria, in particular in the Upper Tigris region and in the region south of Lake Urmia in the 860s to 820s.

According to the Assyrian sources, the first contacts between Assyria and Urartu date to the reign of Assurnasirpal II (884–859 BC) and are the result of Assyrian advances into Anatolia, in the region of the Tigris headwaters.¹² Open conflict is first attested in the inscriptions of Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC), but when recounting his very first campaign in the year 859 BC into Urartian territory, ruled by king Arramu,¹³ the Assyrian narrative suggests not

¹¹ For Shupria, Kumme, Ukku and Musasir, some of the most important among these states, see Radner 2012.

¹² Grayson 1991, A.0.101.2: 13 and parallels.

¹³ Grayson 1996, A.0.102.2 i 14–25 and parallel.

so much a first encounter but another stage in an ongoing war. It is therefore likely that the open conflict between Assyria and Urartu had already started in the later part of Assurnasirpal's reign, for which we are lacking accounts. However, there is pictorial evidence: a scene on the bronze sheathing decorating the gates of the Mamu temple of Imgur-Ellil (Balawat), created during the late reign of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BC), shows Assyrians fighting at 'Mt Urina' (according to the cuneiform label) against warriors dressed in a style later exclusively reserved for depicting Urartians.¹⁴

The inscriptions of Shalmaneser III of Assyria (859–824 BC), our key source material for this period of Assyro-Urartian relations, record several raids into established Urartian territory as well as sieges and, for 856 BC, a major pitched battle near the then-capital city of Arzashkun. Although the exact location of this city is not known, a position in north-western Iran, to the west or south-west of Lake Urmia, appears to be most likely.¹⁵ It would be a mistake to see in Arramu by default the founder of the Urartian state, for the Assyrian sources suggest nothing of the sort; rather, Shalmaneser's accounts create the impression of a firmly established, well-oiled state with an impressive war machinery at its call, and this could be seen to imply that Arramu's kingdom was more than a fledgling state at the time.

Assyria was apparently able to counter the Urartian expansion attempts in the Murat Su region and to the west and south of Lake Urmia. The Assyrian raids and the attack on the Urartian centre of Arzashkun would seem to be designed to destabilise the state and prevent the consolidation of Urartian territorial gains. Although these attempts remained unsuccessful in the longer run, we may assume a connection between the surely negative effects of the Assyrian incursions and some drastic adjustments in the young Urartian state. This is, firstly, the dynastic change from Arramu to Sarduri son of Lutibri at some point after 844 BC and before 830 BC and, secondly, the move of the capital city from Arzashkun to Turushpa, a well-protected mountain fortress on the eastern shore of Lake Van.

In 830 BC, when the Assyrian army clashed with the Urartian forces, now under the command of king Sarduri son of Lutipri, the odds seem to have changed in Urartu's favour.¹⁶ When an Assyrian army reached the regions west of Lake Urmia a decade later in 820 BC, they found them to be firmly under Urartian control.¹⁷

¹⁴ Curtis and Tallis 2008, 55, 160–61, figs. 59–60; Fuchs 2012, 160; Piller 2012, 389.

¹⁵ Piller 2012, 388–89.

¹⁶ Grayson 1996, A.O.102.14:141–146 and parallel.

¹⁷ Grayson 1996, A.O.103.1 ii 16–30.

The new ruler Sarduri was the first Urartian king to commission his own inscriptions. Crucially, they were composed in Assyrian cuneiform script and also language, unlike the contemporary Assyrian inscriptions that used a literary dialect emulating the Old Babylonian language. Sarduri's inscriptions are modelled on Assyrian royal letters rather than on inscriptions.¹⁸ One must therefore assume that Sarduri's inscriptions were the creation of an Assyrian, either captive or renegade, who was familiar with the letter-writing conventions of the Assyrian government and therefore also its administrative practices more generally. The advice and services of such an individual would have been invaluable at a time when consolidating and organising the young Urartian state was the key challenge for Sarduri. The agency of this anonymous Assyrian individual may serve to explain structural similarities in Urartu's state organisation with the southern neighbour.¹⁹

The open conflict between Urartu and Assyria continued throughout the long reign of Shalmaneser and into the reign of his successor Shamshi-Adad V (823–811 BC) and his contemporary, Sarduri's son Ishpuini. When an early inscription of Shamshi-Adad describes a raid on Urartian territory, namely '11 fortresses with 200 settlements', conducted probably in the year 620 or not long after, the region in question seems to describe territories south of Lake Urmia formerly held by Assyria's vassal state Gilzanu.²⁰ Urartu would seem to have profited from the succession war that paralysed Assyria between 826 and 820 BC. No longer plagued by Assyrian raids into its territory, Urartu was able to expand its dominion and to secure control over the previously contested lands around Lake Urmīye.

810s–782 BC: AVOIDING DIRECT CONFRONTATION WITH ASSYRIA

For the next four decades, we have no reports on the contacts between Assyria and Urartu. During this time, Assyria was preoccupied with consolidating the gains in territory achieved throughout the 9th century, and we may assume a similar situation for Urartu.

By 820, over the course of about half a century, Urartu had been able to establish the mountain range south of the Murat Su on the one hand and the Zagros main range on the other hand as its boundaries, banishing Assyria from territories previously regarded as owing it allegiance and tribute. Judging from

¹⁸ Wilhelm 1987, 106.

¹⁹ Radner 2011, 742–43.

²⁰ Fuchs 2012, 136, 139.

the Assyrian sources, the following centuries are marked by the avoidance of further conflict. While Urartu was clearly strong enough to deter Assyria from attempting to regain its lost claims in south-western Anatolia and north-western Iran, it did not endeavour to extend its territories at the expense of its southern rival.

781–744 BC: ENCROACHING ON ASSYRIAN INTERESTS

Between 781 and 774 BC, Assyria and Urartu found themselves again in a more or less permanent state of open and violent conflict. The theatres of war were located in north-western Iran (called ‘Gutium’ in the Assyrian inscriptions) and ‘Hatti’, i.e. the successor states of that Bronze Age kingdom in the border region between modern Turkey and Syria. While neither side was able to make permanent territorial gains, we can safely assume that the exploits of the two armies, which lived off the land while on campaign, resulted in severe economic pressure on the local kingdoms of Carchemish,²¹ Marqasu (the region around modern Maraş) and Kummuhu (Commagene, centred on modern Samsat).

Information is sparse but this time, Urartu emerges very much as the aggressor. The kingdom attempted to enlarge its sphere of influence at the expense of the Assyrian empire. The conflicts in the years 781, 780, 779, 778 and 776 are but tersely reported in the Assyrian Eponym Chronicles which feature the entry ‘Against Urartu’ for these years.²²

We have considerably more information for the year 774, when inscriptions of the Assyrian commander-in-chief (*turtānu*) Shamshi-ilu – charged with protecting the Assyrian empire’s western front from his stronghold of Til-Barsip (Tell Ahmar on the Middle Euphrates) – complement the so-called Annals of Argishti son of Minua. Urartu can be seen on the offensive, and both the Assyrian and the Urartian sources report Urartian attacks on Assyrian territories.

The fifth year in Argishti’s Annals corresponds to the year 774 BC, according to the calculations of Fuchs.²³ Generally speaking, the Annals are interspersed with praise to the gods and somewhat formulaic so that the flow of the narrative is frequently not entirely clear. However, correspondences with toponyms known from Assyrian sources allow to confidently pin-point the geographical horizon of the Urartian campaign in the fifth year as the Central Zagros region:

Argishti says: For the god Haldi I accomplished these undertakings. The god Haldi went to war with his weapon, he defeated the troops of the land Assyria, he

²¹ Marriott and Radner 2015.

²² Millard 1994, 38–39.

²³ Fuchs 2012, 151.

defeated the land of the (tribe) 'Arsita, He subjected the land to Argishti. Argishti son of Minua says: I *added* the land Assyria (and) its troops to my land. I mobilised the troops. I prayed to the god Haldi, (my) lord, the weather-god, the sun-god (and all) the gods of the land Biainili (= Urartu). Through the greatness of my Lord *ali abadi* the gods listened to me.²⁴

The text continues with an account of the Urartian incursions into the territories of Baruata (Assyrian Bit-Barrû/Barrua), Babilu (Assyrian Dannutu-samar-Babili: the mountain lands stretching from the Diyala headwaters into western Iran)²⁵ and Parsua. The traditional Mesopotamian designation for the Central Zagros region, where we find Argishti's forces campaigning, is Gutium. According to the inscriptions of Shamshi-ilu, one of the most senior officials of the Assyrian king Adad-nerari III, he was able to expel the Urartian forces from Gutium, and as Fuchs argued,²⁶ it is very likely that this report needs to be connected to Argishti's account for his fifth year. The inscription on two monumental stone lion statues adorning the gate of Shamshi-ilu's residence city Til-Barsip celebrates this event with the following words:

At that time Argishti, the Urartian – the number of whose forces is huge like a thick cloud and who had not had relations with (lit. 'stretched out his hand to') any previous king – rebelled and assembled the people together at the land of the Gutium. He put his (forces for) battle in good order (and then) all his troops marched into the mountains for battle. By the command of the god Ashur, the father, the great lord and the goddess Mullissu, the lofty mother of the Esharra temple, foremost among the gods, Shamshi-ilu, the field marshal, the great herald, [the administrator of] temples, head of the extensive army, put a strong force of soldiers into those mountains. With the great roar of drums (and) weapons at the ready which reverberate terrifyingly, he rushed forth like a terrible storm. He let fly the stormy steeds, harnessed to his chariot, against him (Argishti) like the Anzu-bird and defeated him. He (Argishti) abandoned his troops (and) scattered people (and), frightened by the battle, he escaped like a thief. He (Shamshi-ilu) captured from him his camp, his royal treasure, (and) his [...].²⁷

The inscription of a fragmentary stone monument from Dohuk in the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq also celebrates the success of the commander-in-chief against Argishti and parallels and is likely to complement the account from Til-Barsip:

Shamshi-ilu, man fearless [in battle, ...] ... upon his steeds, the extensive river [...] to him and Argishti, in the midst of battle, the bow [...] he (Argishti) abandoned] his camp (and) with a single horse he [disappeared. ...].²⁸

²⁴ CTU A8-3 ii 49-iii 3; English translation courtesy Birgit Christiansen.

²⁵ Cf. Fuchs 2012, 150.

²⁶ Fuchs 2012, 150.

²⁷ Grayson 1996, A.0.104.2010: 11–18.

²⁸ Grayson 1996, A.0.104.2011: 3'–6'.

I do not find convincing Fuchs's assumption²⁹ that this text reports another confrontation, perhaps at the Murat Su river in Anatolia, as the headwaters of the Lower Zab and the Diyala provide ample candidates for identification with 'the extensive river' and as the passage is otherwise very similar to the text of the Til-Barsip lions.

For the following year, corresponding to 773 BC, Argishti's Annals describe another defeat of the Assyrian forces as well as the expulsion of Assyria from territories in north-western Iran; the land Bushtu borders onto the land Mana, Assyrian Mannea, which occupies the region south of Lake Urmia.

[Argishti] says: For the god Haldi I accomplished these undertakings in one year. The god Haldi [went to war with] his weapon, he defeated [the soldiers] of Assyria, he defeated the land Bushtu (and) the land Tariu, he subjected them to Argishti. Through the greatness of the god Haldi Argishti says: I built fortresses, I *controlled* the land Shurishili; (I) ...ed the soldiers of the land Assyria in front of my land. I prayed to the god Haldi, my Lord, the weather-god, the sun-god, (and all) the gods of the land Biainili (= Urartu). Through the greatness of my Lord *ali abadi* the gods listened to me. Argishti son of Minua says: The god Haldi is *victorious*, the weapon of the god Haldi is *victorious*. Through the greatness Haldi I mobilised the *auarashi* men, I expelled the land Assyria, I killed [...] from my land; Dadani (and) the *auarashi* men. [...] and I burnt down.³⁰

In Argishti's annals, Assyria is again mentioned for the eighth year, that is 771 BC, in the context of campaign against the country Mana (Assyrian Mannea). From there, Argishti's forces are able to reach 'the pass of the land Assyria', certainly one of the passes across the Zagros main ridge at the border between Iran and the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq, possibly Kele near Qaladze.

Argishti says: For the god Haldi I achieved these undertakings in one year. Haldi went to war with his weapon, he defeated the land Mana (Assyrian Mannea), he defeated the land Irkiuni and he submitted them to Argishti. Through the greatness of the god Haldi Argishti son of Minua says: I prayed to Haldi, my Lord, the weather-god, the sun-god (and all) the gods of the land Biainili. Through the greatness of (my) Lord *ali abadi* the gods listened to me. Argishti son of Minua says: Haldi is *victorious*, the weapon of the god Haldi is *victorious*. Through the greatness of the god Haldi I went to war against the land Mana, I conquered the land Irkiuni, I came to the pass of the land Assyria; 6471 people in one year, some (of them) I killed, some (of them) I deported alive, (together with) 286 horses, 2251 cattle, 8205 sheep.³¹

²⁹ Fuchs 2012, 150.

³⁰ CTU A8-3: iii 18–23; English translation courtesy Birgit Christiansen.

³¹ CTU A8-3: iv 9–39; English translation courtesy Birgit Christiansen.

During the reign of Argishti, Urartu clearly had the upper hand in the relationship with the Assyrian empire. It was the aggressor against whose incursions Assyria just about managed to defend itself. Ultimately, however, Urartu did not substantially increase its territory at Assyria's expense. But the kingdom was able to consolidate its power and influence over smaller polities that hitherto had accepted Assyrian dominion. The available sources highlight this in particular for north-western Iran.

The following two decades saw Assyria entangled with internal problems. The Eponym Chronicles mention a series of epidemics and rebellions as the key events of years during the period, and the Assyrian army was largely occupied at home.³² During that time, Urartu's influence in 'Hatti' – the border region between modern Turkey and Syria, west of the Euphrates – grew steadily. By the time Sarduri son of Argishti ('Sarduri II') came to the throne, Urartian power had eclipsed that of Assyria in the minds of some local rulers who had formerly accepted the Assyrian king as overlord and arbiter in all border conflicts.

This led again to open conflict between Assyria and Urartu. In 754 BC, the Urartian troops under Sarduri's command defeated the Assyrian forces of Assur-nerari V (754–745 BC). As the Assyrian Eponym Chronicles specify that the army went 'Against Arpad' in 754,³³ it is generally assumed that this battle took place in the territory of the kingdom of Arpad in northern Syria: 'The god Haldi went to war with his weapon. ... He defeated Ashur-nerari son of Adad-nerari, king of the land Assyria.'³⁴

However, despite defeating the newly appointed king Assur-nerari V in his accession year, Sarduri did not capitalise on his victory and refrained from attempting incursions into territories under direct Assyrian control. In the next decade, Urartu contended itself with bringing the smaller kingdoms of south-western Anatolia and north-western Iran into its sphere of influence.

743–735 BC: ASSYRIA STRIKES BACK

A dozen years later, in 743 BC, just after Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BC) had taken the Assyrian throne for himself by force, the new king headed into the territory of one of Urartu's new clients and defeated the Urartian army in a second battle in Arpad. The Eponym Chronicles state prosaically: 'The land

³² Millard 1994, 40–43.

³³ Millard 1994, 43.

³⁴ *CTU A 9-1*: left edge ll. 1–2, 8–10.

Urartu was defeated at the city Arpad.³⁵ The text inscribed on the stone wall decorations of Tiglath-pileser's palace in the capital city Kalhu adds more detail regarding the fighting and includes a battle in the territory of Kummuhu (Commagene), the taking of the Urartian camp and the flight of the king, as well as the subsequent pursuit of the Urartian forces back to Turushpa:

Sarduri of the land Urartu revolted against me and conspired with Mati'-il son of Agusi (i.e. king of Arpad). Between the lands [Kishtan] and Halpi, districts of the city Kummuhu, I utterly defeated him and took his entire camp away from him. He became frightened of [the terrifying radiance of] my weapons, mounted a mare [in] order to save his life, escaped during the night to Mount Sizir, a rugged mountain, and ascended (it).³⁶

Yet again an Urartian king is portrayed as a coward who abandons his troops and flees on a lone horse, this time from the battlefield – whether this is fact or fiction is unclear; we shall see that not only Sarduri's predecessor Argishti but also his successor Rusa are said to flee in this very fashion.

Tiglath-pileser's inscription continues immediately with a description of the siege of Turushpa, but this summary account of the king's greatest deeds conflates the 743 events with the campaign of 735 BC, for which the Eponym Chronicles offer another terse 'Against the land Urartu'. The so-called Annals of Tiglath-pileser, the very fragmentarily preserved year-by-year account of the king's deeds, would have offered far more detail but what we have are merely accounts of the spoils of people, equids, cattle and sheep from the Assyrian raids deep into Urartian territory.³⁷ Another equally broken inscription makes it clear that the incursion followed the course of the Murat Su river, the Assyrian Arsanian.³⁸ The final destination was the Urartian capital city of Turushpa:

I confined Sarduri of the land Urartu to the city Turushpa, his city, and inflicted a great defeat upon him before his city gates. I fashioned my royal image and erected (it) in front of the city Turushpa. or a distance of seventy leagues, [I proudly] marched [through the] extensive land of Urartu, from one end to the other (lit. 'from above to below'), (and) I had no opponent (therein).³⁹

This was the first time, and as far as we know, also the only time that Assyrian troops ever reached Turushpa. Situated on a rock high above Lake Van, the city proved impregnable. However, the siege had high symbolic significance and marked a change in the balance of power, heralding Assyria's supremacy

³⁵ Millard 1994, 43.

³⁶ Tadmor and Yamada 2011, 103, no. 41: 15'-21'.

³⁷ Tadmor and Yamada 2011, 54-57, nos. 18-19.

³⁸ Tadmor and Yamada 2011, 89, no. 36: 11'-13'.

³⁹ Tadmor and Yamada 2011, 103, no. 41: 21'-26'.

over the Near East. Already the Assyrian victory of 743 had massively curbed Urartian engagement in the West. Without Urartian support troops to assist them, the northern Syrian kingdoms of Arpad, Hamath and Unqu were invaded by the Assyrian army in the following years and annexed as provinces.⁴⁰ The year 735 saw Assyrian domination confirmed although it is extremely doubtful that Tiglath-pileser's victory monument survived for long at Turushpa. No trace of it has ever been found.

734–708 BC: LOSING REGIONAL INFLUENCE IN SOUTH-WESTERN ANATOLIA AND NORTH-WESTERN IRAN

In the light of the ongoing Assyrian expansion in the West, the surviving smaller kingdoms in the modern border region between Turkey and Syria, such as Que (Cilicia), are known to have actively sought Urartu's protection. But these attempts seem to have been largely unsuccessful, and in some cases the diplomatic delegations never even reached their destination. Hence, after the annexation of Que as an Assyrian province just prior to, or at the very beginning of, the reign of Sargon II (721–705 BC), the province's new Assyrian governor was able to report to his king that 'A messenger of Mita of Mushki (i.e. Midas the Phrygian) has come to me, bringing me 14 men of Que whom (their king) Warikas had sent to Urartu as an embassy,' to which the king replies: 'This is extremely good! My gods Ashur, Shamash, Bel and Nabû have now taken action, and without a battle or anything, the man of Mushki has given us his word and become our ally!'⁴¹

While Urartu was keeping quiet on the western front, it did not give up its efforts to counter Assyrian influence entirely. Urartu now concentrated its military activities on north-western Iran and attempted to replace Assyria as the overlord of its regional client states. In particular, Assyria and Urartu participated between 719 and 714 BC with great energy in the complex secession and succession wars that ripped apart the kingdom of Mannea⁴² in north-western Iran. During that time, parts of Mannea seceded to form the kingdom of Zikirtu.⁴³

Assyrian and Urartian military involvement in Mannea's affairs culminated in 714 BC in a pitched battle on Mt Uaush, which Sargon II's famous account in his Letter to the God Assur⁴⁴ styled as an epic confrontation between himself

⁴⁰ Radner 2006, 58–63.

⁴¹ Parpola 1987, no. 1.

⁴² Fuchs 1994, 447–50 *s.v.* Mannaja.

⁴³ Fuchs 1994, 471 *s.v.* Zikirtu.

⁴⁴ Thureau-Dangin 1912; most recent editions: Mayer 2013; Frame 2020, 271–307, no. 65.

and Rusa II of Urartu, who is said to have cowardly fled the battlefield: ‘In order to save his life, he abandoned his chariot, mounted a mare and fled ahead of his army’ (l. 140). This closely resembles the description of his predecessors Argishti and Sarduri in Shamshi-ilu’s and Tiglath-pileser’s inscriptions – clearly a literary *topos* that highlights how such battle reports should not tempt us to reconstruct the actual events of battle. Sargon’s later inscriptions assigned fateful relevance to this battle, as Rusa’s shameful act was seen as resulting directly in his equally shameful suicide in 713 BC.⁴⁵ However, this Assyrian interpretation may not necessarily have echoed Urartian views on the matter. How significant the engagement in Mannea and its eventual failure were for Urartian foreign policy is unclear. But one can certainly assume that Urartu’s inability to champion the interests of its chosen candidate must have considerably damaged its credibility as a powerful protector in the eyes of the world.

Nevertheless, some still saw Urartu as a credible alternative to Assyria. Muwatalli of Kummuhu (Commagene) could look back at long years as an Assyrian ally, and his country had been loyal to the Assyrian empire for at least a century.⁴⁶ Sargon II of Assyria (721–704 BC) had only recently rewarded Muwatalli’s loyalty with additional territories, when he violated his agreements with Assyria and entered a treaty with Urartu in 709 BC.⁴⁷ Perhaps Muwatalli’s betrayal was the outcome of an Urartian diplomatic offensive designed to drastically alter the balance of power in that strategically important region on its south-western perimeter, after having lost influence in Iran. In the light of the Assyrian annexation of the neighbouring kingdoms of Carchemish in 717 BC⁴⁸ and Marqasu in 711 BC,⁴⁹ an alliance with Urartu may have seemed to Muwatalli as the only way to preserve Kummuhu’s independence. However that may be, when the Assyrian forces attacked the turncoat vassal in the following year there is no mention of any direct engagement with Urartu, which must have bitterly disappointed this newest member of the Urartian block.

In 708 BC, Kummuhu was conquered and integrated into the Assyrian provincial system. As a result, Assyria now shared for the very first time a border with Urartu. Sargon did not take any risks with the new neighbour. Kummuhu was put under the direct command of one of the highest military officials and thus given the special status reserved for heavily militarised provinces in

⁴⁵ Fuchs 1994, 416 s.v. Ursā.

⁴⁶ Radner 2009, 232–33.

⁴⁷ Fuchs 1994, 413 s.v. Muttallu.

⁴⁸ Radner 2006, 58.

⁴⁹ Radner 2006, 61.

potential conflict areas. The region was now known as the Land of the Commander-in-Chief of the Left (*turtānu shumēlu*).⁵⁰

That the two rival powers now shared a boundary was bound to have changed their relationship. There are no conflicts reported in the sources for the following decades, although the Assyrian military intervention in the former Urartian influence sphere continued, in particular in south-western Anatolia. Unlike previous rulers, Argishti and his successors have not left any monuments in this region, and we may take this as an indication for Urartu's withdrawal from this specific theatre of war, in avoidance of a direct confrontation with Assyria.

707–660s BC: ENTENTE WITH ASSYRIA

It was at this time that Urartu's northern border was seriously threatened by the incursions of Cimmerian riders who had entered Anatolia from the Caucasus region, as Assyrian intelligence reports relayed to the king.⁵¹ The years of active military conflict between Assyria and Urartu ended. To our knowledge, however, no formal peace treaty was ever concluded.

Relations seem more cordial some three decades later in the 670s, although there is still no peace treaty in place. Nevertheless, in 673 BC, the direct contact zone between Assyria and Urartu significantly increased as a consequence of the Assyrian annexation of Shupria, a kingdom in the headwaters of the Tigris on Urartu's south-western border. Yet Esarhaddon of Assyria (680–669 BC) appears very keen to appease Urartu, at least after the event, by voluntarily handing over every Urartian encountered on Shuprian territory.⁵²

The careful management of the relationship may be linked to the assassination of Sennacherib of Assyria (704–681 BC) and his murderers' escape to Urartu after Esarhaddon's victory in the ensuing succession war.⁵³ As the killers were Sennacherib's own sons and Esarhaddon's brothers and therefore had a legitimate claim to the Assyrian throne (for patricide or fratricide were not considered an obstacle to an Assyrian prince's claim to the crown), the fact that they found refuge in Urartu enabled Assyria's arch rival to put considerable pressure on the reigning Assyrian king who could never consider his

⁵⁰ Radner 2006, 48–49.

⁵¹ Lanfranchi 1990.

⁵² Leichty 2011, no. 33 iii 28'–34'.

⁵³ Frahm 1997, 18–19.

possession of the throne absolutely secure as long as Sennacherib's sons or their offspring were alive.

This explains why Esarhaddon and his successor Assurbanipal were careful not to cross Urartian interests, handing over Urartian fugitives, as Esarhaddon did after annexing the buffer state Shupria in 673, or refraining from retaliation, as Assurbanipal did when later faced with an Urartian raid into Shupria.⁵⁴

Andreas Fuchs persuasively argued that the threat that Urartu was able to exercise over the Assyrian monarch may have resulted in substantial Assyrian payments to Urartu in order to ensure that the murderous princes were not allowed to return.⁵⁵ The existence of such an agreement between Assyria and Urartu would also provide a partial answer to the question of how the numerous large-scale Urartian building projects of the 7th century, including Karmir-Blur, Bastam, Ayanis and Kef Kalesi, were funded. That Assyrian workers were involved in the construction of the sanctuary of Ayanis on the eastern shore of Lake Van is explicitly stated in the temple inscription⁵⁶ and also indicated by the finds of Assyrian pottery in some houses in the residential area, whose occupants' meat consumption (far less beef, more mutton) moreover differed significantly from that of their neighbours.⁵⁷ Craftsmen such as these may have been sent to Urartu as part of the payments to guarantee the royal plotters' permanent absence from Assyria and can be connected to the fresh Assyrian impulses detectable in Urartian art at that time.⁵⁸

650s–640s BC: ACCEPTANCE OF ASSYRIAN SOVEREIGNTY

In 652 BC, there is definite evidence for diplomatic relations between the two states. However, by that year Assyria's thoughtful attitude towards Urartu had most certainly ended and been replaced with an unequal relationship that saw Assyria in a much stronger position. This is demonstrated in Assurbanipal's inscriptions and also in his Nineveh palace reliefs⁵⁹ which show him treating an Urartian diplomatic delegation with contempt and threat, forcing them to witness the abuse of their fellow diplomats from Elam:

⁵⁴ Novotny and Jeffers 2018, no. 3: iv 6–14 and parallels.

⁵⁵ Fuchs 2012, 141–44.

⁵⁶ *CTU* A12-1: section VI, line 10.

⁵⁷ Stone 2012, 97.

⁵⁸ Seidl 2004, 207.

⁵⁹ Kaelin 1999, 26, 28, 30–31: scenes 52, 55, 58, 60, 73–74.

(As for) Rusa, the king of the land Urartu, he heard about the might of the god Ashur and the goddess Ishtar, my lords, and fear of my royal majesty overwhelmed him; he (then) sent his envoys to me in the city Arbail (modern Erbil) to inquire about my well-being. [He ...] horses, mules, [...], horn-shaped (drinking vessels), sceptres, [...], (and) *purṭû*-weapons as his audience gift(s). I made Nabû-damiq (and) Umbadarâ, envoys of the land Elam, stand with writing boards (inscribed with) insolent messages before them.⁶⁰

It would seem that Urartu was no longer in a position to control the Assyrian king, most likely because the murderous princes were no longer alive.

But Urartu's relationship with Assyria was to become even more unequal. The very last Urartian king attested in the Assyrian sources, yet another Sarduri, is presented as a mere client ruler of the Assyrian empire – unlike all his predecessors whom the Assyrian kings had accepted as their equals. King Sarduri is said to have submitted to Assurbanipal and paid tribute to Assyria:

(As for) Sarduri, the king of the land Urartu, whose kings, his ancestors, used to regularly send (messages of) brotherly relations to my ancestors, now, Sarduri heard about the mighty deeds that the great gods had determined for me and, like a son to his father, he constantly sent (messages concerning my) dominion. Moreover, he constantly sent (messages) according to this wording, saying: 'May it be well with the king, my lord.' Reverently (and) humbly, he was (now) sending his substantial audience gift(s) before me.⁶¹

Urartu's position in the world appears much reduced and to the gleeful Assurbanipal, it is now merely one of his numerous client states. Comparing different versions of Assurbanipal's annals makes it possible to pinpoint this turning point in Urartu's relations with the Assyrian empire to sometimes between 646 and 642.⁶²

Afterwards, both the Assyrian and the Urartian sources fall silent about each other and it is impossible to say anything about their continuing relationship. There is little reason to assume that Urartu was able to recover its former political standing. When the Assyrian empire found its end in the wars from 614 BC onwards, Urartu was apparently no longer in any position to get involved.

⁶⁰ Novotny and Jeffers 2018, no. 6: vii 20'–28' // no. 7: vii 11–20.

⁶¹ Novotny and Jeffers 2018, no. 11: x 40–50.

⁶² Fuchs 2012, 138.

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