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**A. Kirk Grayson, “Shalmaneser III and the Levantine States:
The “Damascus Coalition”**

Shalmaneser III and the Levantine States:

The “Damascus Coalition Rebellion”¹

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1. Introduction

To begin this paper, I shall quote, from the statement sent to me by Professor Andy Vaughn when he invited me to participate in a symposium “Biblical Lands and Peoples in Archaeology and Text”. The goal of this session “is to promote the interaction between biblical scholars and archaeologists as well as other specialists in ancient Near Eastern Studies ... the gap between biblical scholars and specialists in Assyriology and other fields like archaeology continues to grow wider”.

The widening gap is certainly a real phenomenon, the main reason being the astounding increase in data through publications, archaeology, research in museums and related institutions, and the tremendous increase in numbers of scholars in the relevant fields.

As a personal note on this theme, I — like many of my contemporaries — came to Assyriology from a base in the Hebrew bible. In those days, the 1960s, 1950s, and before, it was generally assumed that an Assyriologist, an Egyptologist, etc. would have a sound backing in, not only the Hebrew bible, but also Aramaic, Arabic, “Comparative Semitics,” etc. Today, this is not the case. During the last few decades it has become apparent in my lectures and seminars that a number of students go blank when I make a biblical reference. Also in those days we did not have the *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* or the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary*.

With the exception of a few polymaths, no one can have the breadth of knowledge of the Ancient Near East that was assumed until about the mid 1960s. There is just too much knowledge to absorb. Thus the focus of each one of us has become narrower and narrower.

It is very timely to encourage serious dialogue amongst the many disciplines and sub-disciplines that have evolved over the last half-century. To use an analogy, if from this meeting we can begin to stop depending upon stepping stones to cross the river, and instead begin to build a real bridge, it will be a major achievement.

I have chosen to speak upon the Assyrian king, Shalmaneser III (858–24 BCE²) because he was the first Assyrian king to concentrate a large proportion of his military campaigns on the “West” (*eber nāri* in Akkadian, which means “across the river” — the river being the Euphrates). In this paper I shall use the terms “West” and “Levant” interchangeably.³

2. Sources

The sources that we have for early Assyrian penetration into the Levant, and specifically for Israel and Judah, are the following. There are the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions that, as is well known, are full of details about conquests but hyperbolic to the point where one must never accept their claims at face value.⁴ Another source, probably more reliable but exceedingly cryptic, are the Eponym Chronicles.⁵ The Assyrian calendar was founded on the eponym system. Each year was given the name of an Assyrian official, called a *līmu*. Thus a scribe, at the end of a document would say *līmu* of *PN*. Lists of these officials, in chronological order, were prepared so that a scribe would know in what year this particular text was written. Some of these lists add, after the *līmu*'s name and title, a cryptic entry about what significant event (usually a military campaign against GN) took place that year which involved the king. Such texts are called “Eponym Chronicles”. For Shalmaneser III's relations with the “West” there is really nothing else. The Damascus Coalition is not mentioned in the ancient Mesopotamian Chronicles, the Hebrew Bible, or Josephus.

3. Assyrian Relations with the Levant Before Shalmaneser III's Reign

Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076) certainly crossed the Euphrates on a number of occasions. This brought him into direct contact with the looming threat of the Aramaeans. Indeed on one occasion he claims to have defeated six tribes of Aramaeans at the foot of Jebel Bishri. But,

as successful as these Assyrian attacks may have been, it did not stop the Aramaeans for very long. By the reign of Ashur-bel-kala (1073–1056), the last great king of the Middle Assyrian period, the Aramaeans were causing serious disruptions in communications between Assyria, Phoenicia, and Egypt.⁶

Assyria went into decline until the ninth century that saw the emergence of some great Assyrian kings, notably Ashurnasirpal II (883–859) and his son and successor Shalmaneser III (858–824).⁷ These two outstanding monarchs brought stability back to the region and began the creation of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, a fact that had great implications for the states of Israel and Judah.

4. Shalmaneser III and the Levant

Much attention has been centered on Shalmaneser III in recent years. A major reason for this is the publication of the significant Calah inscriptions copied by Peter Hulin.⁸ Some other new inscriptions have come to light over the last decade. An excellent major monograph on this king has been published by Shigeo Yamada⁹. All of these help shed more light on this topic. In this paper, concentrating on the “Damascus Coalition”, I shall attempt to incorporate the new material with the old, and see what kind of picture emerges.

Military campaigns were carried out in each of the 34 regnal years of Shalmaneser.¹⁰ An outstanding feature of these campaigns is the concentration on two fronts, the North, especially Urartu, and the West. We do not know how this policy was developed — council of war, individual decision by the monarch, etc.? However it is clear that there was a grand design.

Some historians of ancient Assyria reject the idea that the purpose of the military campaigns of the Assyrians followed a “grand plan”. My view is that there were such “grand plans”.¹¹ Here is the reasoning. The Assyrian state, especially the Assyrian army, was well organized and regimented. The Assyrians had great knowledge of, and interest in, foreign lands, their cultures, economies, and languages. It is hard to believe that they did not, with their disciplined structure and extensive knowledge of the world around them,

have long-range plans to which the aims of the annual campaigns, barring emergencies, adhered.

Imagine such a scenario as the following. One morning Shalmaneser III is woken by his rab-shaqe (cup-bearer and one of the highest ranking officers in the army) bearing the monarch's morning bowl of wine and announcing that it is the fifteenth of Nisan. Still imagining, the king replies: "Fetch the tartanu [field marshal] and the rab-sha-reshi [chief eunuch, also a high ranking officer] and the die.¹² Time to decide where to lead our great campaign this year". Is this scene credible?

The Western policy begun by Shalmaneser III would continue, with interruptions, almost to the fall of Nineveh in 612. The long-range aims were to profit from the wealth of the Levant and to add Egypt to the Neo-Assyrian empire.

5. The Situation in the Levant at Shalmaneser III's Time

The situation in the Levant, specifically in Israel and Judah, when Shalmaneser III launched his assault, is not for me to describe in detail. There are many who are experts on this matter and have covered this topic extensively. Let me just summarize by saying that during this period most of the Levantine states forgot their bickering with their neighbours and formed two separate coalitions: the one was in the northern area where several small states, such as Sam'al and Patinu, formed a coalition and the second, which is our concern today, was in the south and I have called this the "Damascus Coalition" or the "Damascus-Hamath Coalition". The chief powers in the southern group were Damascus and Hamath. Allied with them were a number of other states including Israel, Byblos, and Egypt.

6. The Damascus Coalition¹³

When Shalmaneser III attempted to move west, across the Euphrates, and then south along the Levantine coast he encountered something which none of his predecessors had confronted: the Damascus Coalition. This alliance consisted of Adad-idri (Hadad-ezer) of

Damascus, Irhuleni of Hamath (these two cities being the leaders), Ahab of Israel, Gindibu the Arab, Byblos, Egypt, Matinu-ba'al of Arvad, Irqantu, Usanatu, Adunu-ba'al of Shianu, Ba'asa of Bit-Ruhubi, and “the Ammonite”. According to Yamada, there are six versions of the sixth campaign (853) in Shalmaneser's royal inscriptions. To illustrate the kind of differences among them, let us look at two examples. Some versions include the rulers of Damascus and Hamath among the “12” kings of the coalition while others add “12” kings after Damascus and Hamath, thus giving “14” kings. Yet another version has “13”. The second example is the number of slain enemy troops. It varies from 14,000, up to 20,500, then 25,000, and finally the highest number is 29,000.¹⁴

Traditionally many of these allies had been bitter foes before Shalmaneser's invasion. The question, then, is why did they bury the hatchet at this time and agree to present a united front? Why not, for example, in Ashurnasirpal II's time? No one, as far as I know, has tackled this question before.

For a lack of sources to answer this question, one can only hazard a reason (or reasons) for this action. My own view — and this may well prove to be wrong some day as more evidence emerges — is that these states had been taken totally by surprise by the sudden appearance and overwhelming power of the Assyrian army under Ashurnasirpal II. The Assyrian army quickly crossed the Euphrates and thundered up and down the Levantine coast. After his incursions they, the Levantine states, became more astute and better informed about the intentions and movements of the Assyrian army. Receipt of such information would have been facilitated by the presence in the Assyrian heartland of tens of thousands of Levantines who had been carried off by Ashurnasirpal II and Shalmaneser III to work on their building projects and to create new cultivable land in the Jezirah to provide food for the increasing numbers of non-productive officials and residents of the Assyrian cities. Zablocka has estimated that in this period approximately 193,000 people were carried off from the West, and of these about 139,000 were Aramaeans.¹⁵ Eventually some of these families insinuated themselves and rose in the Assyrian bureaucracy. We know that the Aramaeans were already doing this in the reign of Shalmaneser III.¹⁶ It is impossible to believe that such people did not, by various means, keep in touch with their compatriots at home. This, certainly, could have provided a communicative network — an undercover operation — about Assyrian intentions and movements.

The Damascus Coalition made its first stand at Qarqar on the Orontes in 853. The precise location of Qarqar on the Orontes is still questionable. The traditional identification of the site is at Tell Qarqur which is just south of where the main road between Aleppo and Latakia crosses the Orontes.¹⁷

The location of Qarqar is one of two questions, the second being the outcome of the battle between the coalition and the Assyrian army. Naturally Shalmaneser, in his inscriptions, boasts of a great victory for himself. He had led his army from Aleppo up the Orontes to Qarqar with little opposition. But at Qarqar he was faced with the coalition which, according to the Kurkh Monolith (written shortly after the event), consisted of almost 4,000 chariots, almost 2,000 cavalry, over 40,000 infantry, and 1,000 camels.¹⁸

Shalmaneser claims to have beaten them and to have slaughtered and plundered as the enemy fled the scene of battle. One must always be sceptical of Assyrian claims and the real outcome of the battle at Qarqar is debatable. The only clear indication that the Assyrian boast is justified is the statement, in the same Assyrian sources, that after the battle the Assyrian army proceeded on to the Mediterranean. On the other hand three further pitched battles were fought with the Damascus Coalition, one in each of 849, 848, and 845. If the coalition had suffered a setback at Qarqar, they had not been beaten. In fact it appears that they had displayed sufficient strength to encourage others to resist the Assyrians; in 849 and 848 Shalmaneser took goods by force from the cities of Carchemish and Bit-Agusi across the Euphrates, although these same states had freely paid tribute in 853 just before the battle at Qarqar. Thus Assyria did not win a great victory on this occasion but neither did she suffer a great defeat; the result was uncertain.

Shalmaneser, unsatisfied with the outcome, concentrated on the Damascus Coalition as much as circumstances would allow until 845. By this time the states immediately west of the Euphrates seem to have been thoroughly subdued. There is no further reference to hostile acts in the region. Thus he was free to attempt once again the penetration of southern Syria. He amassed a force of vast numbers (in 845) — 120,000 according to Assyrian sources —, crossed the Euphrates and claimed a victory over the Damascus Coalition.¹⁹ Was this claim justified? It is a fact that the coalition is never mentioned again, and four years later, in 841, it had disappeared.²⁰ But there had been a change of ruler at Damascus between 845 and 841: Adad-idri (Hadad-ezer) was replaced by Hazael. The pact,

as usual in the Ancient Near East, was regarded as a highly personal affair, and it automatically dissolved with the death of Adad-idri. Certainly the Assyrians did not push farther into Syria immediately after the battle of 845. There is, then, no proof for or against the Assyrian claim to victory in 845 and the dissolution of the Damascus Coalition may have been an independent development. Whatever the reason, by 841 the Damascus Coalition was no more and the main obstacle to Shalmaneser's expansion into southern Syria had vanished.

In 841, Hazael of Damascus, in the face of the Assyrian advance, took up a position on a summit in the foothills of the Lebanon range.²¹ The Assyrians gained the fortified position but Hazael escaped and was pursued and besieged in Damascus. Shalmaneser cut down the orchards and burned the surrounding country but it is not recorded that Hazael yielded. The circumstantial detail and absence of bombast, apart possibly from the large number of troops the Assyrian claims to have won from the Damascene, leave the impression that this is a reasonably faithful account of the events. Thus, although Damascus had not fallen, Shalmaneser could proceed to ravage cities by Mount Hauran and then erect a stele by the sea upon Mount Ba'li-ra'si, the location of which is still in question although Mount Carmel is a possibility.²² He received tribute from Tyre, Sidon, and Jehu (Yaua), king of Israel. In 838–37 he turned his attention to southern Syria for the last time; he plundered cities of Damascus and received tribute from Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos.²³

7. The Results of Shalmaneser III's Levantine Campaigns:

Israel and Judah

It is clear that Israel volunteered submission to Shalmaneser III, presumably in 841, since Jehu (Yaua), as is well known, is portrayed on the Black Obelisk kneeling before the king.²⁴ But there is no evidence that Shalmaneser entered central Israel, let alone Samaria, at any time. Nor is there any evidence of contact with Judah.

8. Aftermath

Eventually Shalmaneser's influence spread as far as Byblos, Sidon, and Tyre, on the Mediterranean coast, all of which paid tribute in 838 as we have just seen. Thus he prepared the way for succeeding kings to move right down the southern Levant, culminating, with many interruptions, in Ashurbanipal's (668–31) invasions of Egypt. By that time, of course, both Israel and Judah were under Assyrian control.

In more detail, Damascus was taken by the Assyrians in Adad-narari III's reign (810–783) — in fact the officer who led the capture was Shamshi-ilu, the field marshal.²⁵ After Adad-narari III's reign and the reign of Shamshi-Adad V (823–11), there was a decline in Assyrian power until the reign of Tiglath-pilaser III (744–27). Under his leadership Assyria campaigned once again to the Levant, including Israel and Judah. Indeed he went beyond these states to enter the Sinai up to the “Brook of Egypt” This penetration continued farther and farther under the following Sargonid kings and led to the campaigns in Egypt under Esarhaddon (680–69) and Ashurbanipal (668–31). All of this activity in the southern Levant was possible only with a firm Assyrian control over Israel and Judah, an aim which Shalmaneser III had initiated.

Notes

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²For the remainder of this paper all dates are BCE unless specified otherwise.

³For Assyria's activities in the region of the Orontes river see Grayson, “Assyria and the Orontes Valley”, *BCSMS* 36 (2001) pp. 185–87.

⁴See Grayson, “Assyria and Babylonia”, *Orientalia* NS 49 (1980) pp. 170–171; Van Seters, *In Search of History* (New Haven, 1983) pp. 60–68; Carena, *AOAT* 218/1 (1989); Millard, “Story, History, and Theology”, Millard, et al. (eds.), *Faith, Tradition, and History* (Winona Lake, 1994) pp. 37–64; Van Seters, “The Historiography of the Ancient Near East” *CANE* 4 pp. 2433–44. For the Assyrian royal inscriptions themselves see Grayson, *RIMA* 1–3.

⁵See Millard, A., *The Eponyms of the Assyrian Empire*, *SAAS* 2 (1994).

⁶See Grayson, *RIMA* 2 pp. 5–112.

⁷See Grayson, *CAH* 3/1 (2nd ed., 1982) pp. 238–81 and *RIMA* 2–3.

⁸Grayson, *RIMA* 3 pp. 5–170; Yamada, *Iraq* 62 (2000) pp. 65–87.

⁹Yamada, *The Construction of the Assyrian Empire: A Historical Study of the Inscriptions of Shalmaneser III (859–824) Relating of His Campaigns to the West* (Brill, Leiden, 2000). This is hereafter abbreviated as Yamada, *Construction*.

¹⁰This is in itself a phenomenal military achievement.

¹¹See Grayson, *BiOr* 33 (1976) pp. 134–38; *CAH* 3/1 pp. 259–63; Yamada, *Construction* pp. 77–224.

¹²For one of these dice which has been preserved see Grayson, *RIMA* 3 p. 155 and Millard, *Eponyms, Frontispiece* and p. 8 and the literature cited in these works.

¹³For the relevant royal inscriptions see Grayson, *RIMA* 3 pp. 5–179.

¹⁴See Yamada, *Construction* pp. 143–64.

¹⁵J. Zablocka, *Tosunki Agrarne w Panistwie Sargonidow* (Poznan, 1971).

¹⁶See Grayson, *CAH* 3/1 pp. 239–40.

¹⁷Liverani, *Studies Asn.* 2 pp. 77, 115; Yamada, *Construction* pp. 154–55.

¹⁸Grayson, *RIMA* 3, p. 23 ii 90–95.

¹⁹See Yamada, *Construction* pp. 179–83.

²⁰See Yamada, *Construction* pp. 185–95.

²¹See Yamada, *Construction* pp. 185–95.

²²On the location question see Yamada, *Construction* pp. 91–92.

²³See Yamada, *Construction* pp. 205–209.

²⁴*RIMA* 3 p. 149 A.0.102.88. The date of composition is either late 828 or 827.

²⁵See Grayson, *RIMA* 3 pp. 200–238.