

Assyria at empire's threshold. Studies on the reign of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*

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1. Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* and the “Assyrian threshold”

In pleasing symmetry, Antiquity and modern scholarship alike profess Assyria the world's first empire (e.g. Frahm, 2023: 24).¹ Debate over empire's definition aside (Edmonds, 2025c: 11–23), consensus holds that Assyria is the first of a tight sequence of massive Iron-age agrarian states in the Fertile Crescent which depart radically and irrevocably from the preceding Bronze-age tapestry of small and mid-sized peer polities (e.g. Beaulieu, 2005: 49). The dominion of these new, titanic political formations over Western Asia can rightly be judged history's first (known) ‘imperial age’ (Rollinger, 2023), as the same inexorable, paradoxical processes governed each post-Assyrian empire (Neo-Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian). Spatially, the state directly controlled ever greater territories and peasantries through provincial apparatus, yet conquests were no longer hard-fought—each new empire absorbed its predecessor's domain in only a few colossal battles (Altaweel / Squitieri, 2018: 52–56). Temporally, these empires were hardly immortal and swiftly toppled, but their ‘technicians’—the imperial administrative classes—displayed remarkable continuity.² Culturally, the mass “uprooting” (Schaudig, 2022) of conquered populations within imperial space engendered an intense cosmopolitanism or even ‘globalisation’ (Rollinger, 2023); atop this melange of lands and peoples was a sole monarch, whose uniqueness was rationalised through muscular universalism (Maul, 1999) harbouring the postulate of a single, total culture, and thus monotheism. Its literary expression was the romance (Edmonds, 2025c: 4), a new genre across language and script trading the lone, staid, epic hero for a lively nobles, advisors, and ingenues. All of these transformations began with a stride across what has been termed the “Assyrian threshold” (Düring, 2020a), history's earliest imperial incidence.

¹ This study adopts the present author's (Edmonds, 2025c: xiii–xiv) conventions for numbering Assyrian kings, normalising names, and abbreviation (after the *RIA*). Reigns are given from enthronement, rather than first regnal year, and all dates are BC. Thanks are due to this volume's patient editors, three anonymous reviewers, and Andreas Fuchs. This article was written within the framework of the project “Governance in Babylon – Negotiating the Rule of Three Empires” (2021–2026, University of Münster) funded by the European Research Council within the Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement no. 101001619) under principal investigator Kristin Kleber.

² Compare Tall Šayḥ Ḥamad, Syria (Kreppner, 2021), or the Upper Tigris (Roaf, 2021).

For all that these imperial consequences are beyond dispute, controversy over the precise chronological placement of the “Assyrian threshold” abide, a problem compounded by the aforementioned academic disunity over empire’s definition.³ Like the Roman (Liverani, 2011), if more protracted, the Iron-age Assyrian state (10th–7th centuries) is generally imagined as the culmination of a trajectory proceeding from Early Bronze-age city (23rd–20th centuries) to proto-territorial Middle Bronze-age city-state (19th–15th centuries) and then Late Bronze-age territorial state (14th–11th centuries).⁴ Within this scheme, placements of Assyria’s imperial transformation have ranged from the strident 13th-century Middle Assyrian apogee (e.g. Kertai, 2008–2009: 25–27) to the late 850’s zenith of the early Neo-Assyrian period (e.g. Radner, 2015: 4–5),⁵ and finally Assyria’s massive territorial expansion between 745 and 705 (e.g. Frahm, 2023: 125–131; Edmonds, 2025c: 162–164). Central in this assessment is the reign of the Assyrian king Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* (745–727) (see tab. 1).⁶

On 13th Ayyāru (II) 745, an Assyrian prince named Pūlu was enthroned as *Tukultī-apil-Ešarra* at the Assyrian capital of Aššur (Qal‘a Širqāt, Iraq) in rebellion’s wake. In eastern Babylonia scarce months later, the new king undertook Assyria’s first territorial expansion ere a century. In 744, he turned his attention westwards, subduing and mostly annexing the northern Levant by 740, thus unprecedentedly expanding beyond the Euphrates, Assyria’s customary occidental pale. The ensuing five years witnessed further expansion east and west, culminating in a campaign crippling Assyria’s northern foe Urartu for decades (735). Next was the southern Levant, the king finally conquering Assyria’s hoary adversary Dimašqa (Dimašq, Syria) in 732. The east cowed and the west won, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* returned to Babylonia in 731. Enthronement as king of Akkad at Bābili (Bābil, Iraq) in 729 did not curb resistance to his rule, as the Chaldean Mukīn-zēri—the previous incumbent—seems to have held out until late 727 (Edmonds, 2025a). Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* survived his last rival by mere months, dying in Tebētu (X), his new palace at Kalḫu incomplete.⁷

³ Earlier expansive Near Eastern states are sometimes conceptualised as empires (e.g. Barjamovic, 2021), viz. the kingdoms of Akkad (e.g. Liverani, 1993), the Third Dynasty of Ur (e.g. Steinkeller, 2021), or Ḫammu-rāpi and Šamši-Adad (I) (e.g. Van De Mieroop, 2020), despite their inconsequence beyond elite superstructure and impermanence.

⁴ Despite its essentialising, teleological framing, continuities in this state’s self-conception and Assyrian culture and identity do somewhat justify this paradigm (see now Valk, 2025).

⁵ Radner (2014: 103–104) elsewhere distinguishes between an early Neo-Assyrian “hegemonial empire” and a late Neo-Assyrian “territorial empire”.

⁶ Notable portraits include Anspacher, 1912; Garelli, 1991; Grayson, 1991: 71–85; Yamada, 2014; Davenport, 2016; Šašková 2019; Elayi, 2022.

⁷ Some of the surviving sculptured reliefs of his ‘Central Palace’ are demonstrably unfinished, see esp. Slabs 1 and 14 and Relief 49 (Barnett / Falkner, 1962: 8, 14, 33).

Table 1. Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s reign (partially after Tadmor / Yamada, 2011: 13)

Date	Event	Source
13 th Ayyāru (II) 745	Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* is enthroned at Aššur.	SAAS 2, B1: 74'
Tašrītu (VII) 745 (TP IV* 1 st <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* campaigns to the Wādī at-Ṭarṭār and Babylonia.	RINAP 1, TP 4: 1–6; 5; 6: 1–7; SAAS 2, B1: 77'
744 (TP IV* 2 nd <i>palû</i>)	Ep. Bēl-dān. TP IV* campaigns to Namri.	RINAP 1, TP 6: 7–12; 7; 8; 9: 1'–2'; 35 i 5'–20'; SAAS 2, B1: 78'
743 (TP IV* 3 rd <i>palû</i>)	Ep. Tukultī-apil-Ešarra (IV*). TP IV* campaigns to Arpadda, and defeat of Urartu.	RINAP 1, TP 9: 2'–16'; 35 i 21'–43'; SAAS 2, B1: 79'–80'
742 (TP IV* 4 th <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* campaigns to Arpadda.	SAAS 2, B1: 81'
741 (TP IV* 5 th <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* campaigns to Arpadda, city taken after three years.	SAAS 2, B1: 82'
740 (TP IV* 6 th <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* campaigns to Arpadda.	RINAP 1, TP 35 ii 4; SAAS 2, B1: 83'
739 (TP IV* 7 th <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* campaigns to Ulluba.	RINAP 1, TP 10: 1'–8'; 37: 16–46; SAAS 2, B1: 84'
738 (TP IV* 8 th <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* campaigns to Kullania.	RINAP 1, TP 12–15: 1–5; 35 ii 5'–17'; 36: 1'–3'; SAAS 2, B1: 85'
737 (TP IV* 9 th <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* campaigns to Madāya.	RINAP 1, TP 15: 5–12; 16; 17; 35 ii 25'–44'; 36: 4'–7'; 38: 1'–5'; SAAS 2, B1: 86'
736 (TP IV* 10 th <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* campaigns to Mt. Nal.	RINAP 1, TP 36: 8'–10'; 39: 28; 41: 27'; 49 o. 11'; SAAS 2, B1: 87'
735 (TP IV* 11 th <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* campaigns to Urartu.	RINAP 1, TP 18; 19; 36: 11'–13'; 39: 23–25; 41: 21'–26'; SAAS 2, B1: 88'
734 (TP IV* 12 th <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* campaigns to Pilišta.	RINAP 1, TP 42: 8'–15'; 48: 14'–19'; SAAS 2, B1: 89'
733 (TP IV* 13 th <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* campaigns to Dimašqa.	RINAP 1, TP 20–22; SAA 23, 231, o. 3 – r. 3; SAAS 2, B1: 90'; 2 Kings 16:5-8; Is. 7:1

732 (TP IV* 14 th <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* campaigns to Dimašqa.	SAAS 2, B1: 91'; 3: 1' 2 Kings 15:29, 16:9
731 (TP IV* 15 th <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* campaigns to Babylonia.	RINAP 1, TP 23–24; 40: 11–16; 47 o. 15–25; SAAS 2, B1: 92'; B3: 2'
730 (TP IV* 16 th <i>palû</i>)	No campaign (<i>ina mātī</i>)	SAAS 2, B1: 93'; B3: 3'
729 (TP IV* 17 th <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* becomes king of Bābili, “takes the hand of Bēl”.	ABC 1 i 19–23; 24 r. 19'; SAAS 2, B1: 94'; B3: 4'
728 (TP IV* 18 th <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* “takes the hand of Bēl”, campaign against a city (name lost).	BRM 1, 22(?); SAAS 2, B1: 95'; B3: 5'
727 (TP IV* 19 th <i>palû</i>)	TP IV* campaigns to a city (name lost).	SAAS 2, B1: 96'; B3: 6'
Ṭebētu (X) 727	Death of TP IV*. His son Salmānu- ašarēd VI* succeeds him.	ABC 1 i 24–25; SAAS 2, B3: 7'

In but 18 years, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* had doubled his realm’s traditional extent (often despite spirited resistance and demanding biomes) at the expense of a panoply of polities (Levantine, Taurine, Zagrine, and Mesopotamian); myriads of souls were forcibly resettled across the Assyrian domain, and a novel provincial order established across a vast swathe of land from Mediterranean to Gulf.

The enormity and alacrity of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s achievement challenge the historian, not least as the pertinent sources are highly detailed but fragmentary, only promising new insights with patient scrutiny.⁸ The state of documentation for the bookending periods is little better (see fig. 1): On the one hand, the four decades (and five reigns) preceding his accession (783–745) are woefully attested, demanding inference from the better understood—if much debated—reign of his father Adad-nārārī III (811–783);⁹ on the other, the scant evidence for the reign of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s son and successor Salmānu-ašarēd VI* (727–722) can be contained in a single article (Yamada / Yamada 2017), necessitating supplementation with insights from that of the succeeding Šarru-ukīn (722–705). Such contingencies render a judgement of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s reign thus also one of the Assyrian 8th century as a whole, from Adad-nārārī III to Šarru-ukīn (i.e. 811–705). Resultantly, an ecology of differing interpretations of his reign has emerged, nurtured by competing philosophies of history.

⁸ Note the poor textual preservation of his reign (Tadmor, 1967); the sizeable lacunae in his annals composed near the end of his reign are only bridged by means of geographical summaries, supplemented with some administrative and epistolary texts from his reign found at Kalḫu (Nimrūd, Iraq) (see esp. Fales, 2005), and compared to Biblical sources.

⁹ For Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s paternity, see Edmonds, 2025c: 160–162 and below §3.

Recently popular has been a **structuralist** (broadly historicist) stance situating Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* in a long tradition of like-minded conquerors, so that “the entirety of the history of Assyria since its origin prepared for the birth of this empire” (Elayi, 2022: 187). Thus emphasising continuity, proponents either place the “Assyrian threshold” earlier in history (minimising thus Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s achievement), or envisage Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s new empire as the realisation of a pre-existing ‘blueprint’,¹⁰ or (proto-)empire.¹¹ Here, empire is not defined by extent, but rather the nature of power relationships fostered.¹²

For what might be termed the **traditionalist** historian (whose outlook is broadly positivistic), the king’s reign was contrastingly a “watershed in the history of the Near East” which “reshaped the map” (Tadmor, 1994: 9); this position asserts that Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* broke with earlier policy in erecting his empire, and that the “threshold” lies somewhere during or in the wake of his reign. In this case, the expansiveness and explicit crystallisation of a political formation serve as the imperial criterion.¹³

Sallying into this scrimmage, the present chapter re-examines Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s controversial reign against the Assyrian *longue durée* so as to elucidate the chronological placement and nature of the “Assyrian threshold”. It does so by way of three thematic investigations into this king’s era, which are also intended as a prolegomenon to more detailed historical work on the period.

¹⁰ See Garelli, 1991: 51: “Even though this sovereign was able to set up a de facto empire, dividing the conquered territories into provinces, it is not certain that he tried to change his predecessor’s policy drastically along the lines of a preconceived plan. It is perhaps the success of the actions conducted in the traditional spirit of the past which accounted for the change in the political situation and induced his successors to draw new conclusions.”

¹¹ E.g. Radner, 2014: 104: “What has traditionally been labelled the ‘expansion’ of Assyria can be analysed as a fundamental change in the relationship between central power and its local representation.”

¹² See Düring, 2020a: 145–146: “I belong to a group of scholars who argue that there is a great deal of continuity in state institutions, territorial control, and imperial repertoires from the final Late Bronze Age into the Early Iron Age. In this perspective, imperialism consists primarily of a form of domination, and the size of the empire is less central. Indeed, the transformation from a small empire to the first world empire arguably took place within the Neo-Assyrian Period during the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (...) and most of the crucial imperial repertoires that made this expansion possible were already in place from the Middle Assyrian Period onwards.”

¹³ “The enormous size the Assyrian state had reached by 729 and its even larger sphere of influence (...), the complex mechanisms of political and economical control established throughout the realm, the state’s multi-ethnic and multi-lingual character, and the osmotic imbalance between center and periphery – all these features justify calling Assyria, from the time of Tiglath-pileser onwards, an empire *stricto sensu*, possibly the first empire in world history” (Frahm, 2017: 178).

The **first** of these (§2, “The ‘Great Expansion’ and its antecedents”) studies the phenomenon of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s remarkable expansion and its possible motivations, considering potential precedents in Assyrian history. The **second** (§ 3, “Pūlu and the magnates”) re-examines the status and self-representation of elites in Assyria before and after the ‘imperial incidence’ in pursuit of any alterations. The **third** (§4 “Empire improvised?”) considers the internal transformations to Assyria wrought by Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* and what governing logic might have underpinned these. In a **conclusion** (§5), these insights are considered together so as to understand better the actual contours of the ominous “Assyrian threshold” under study.

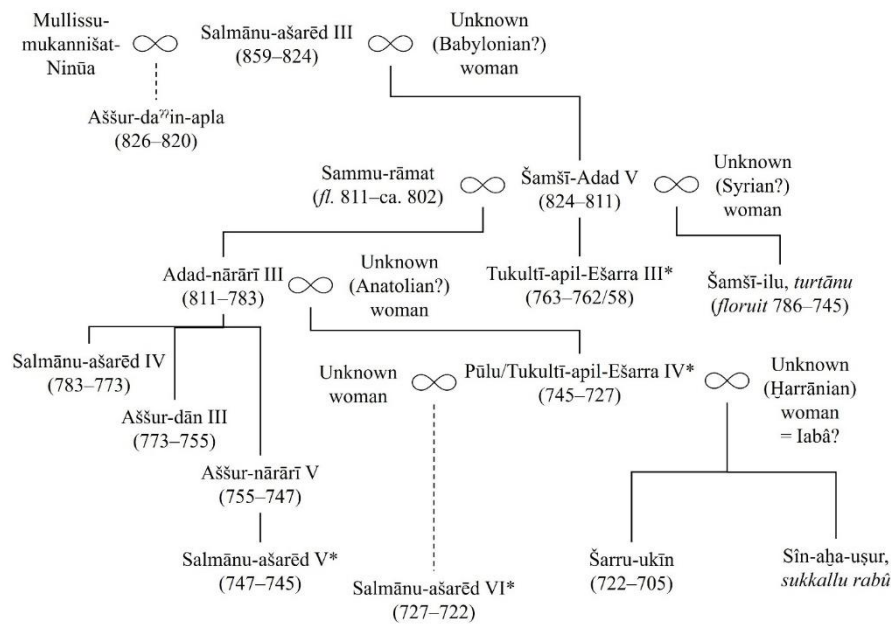
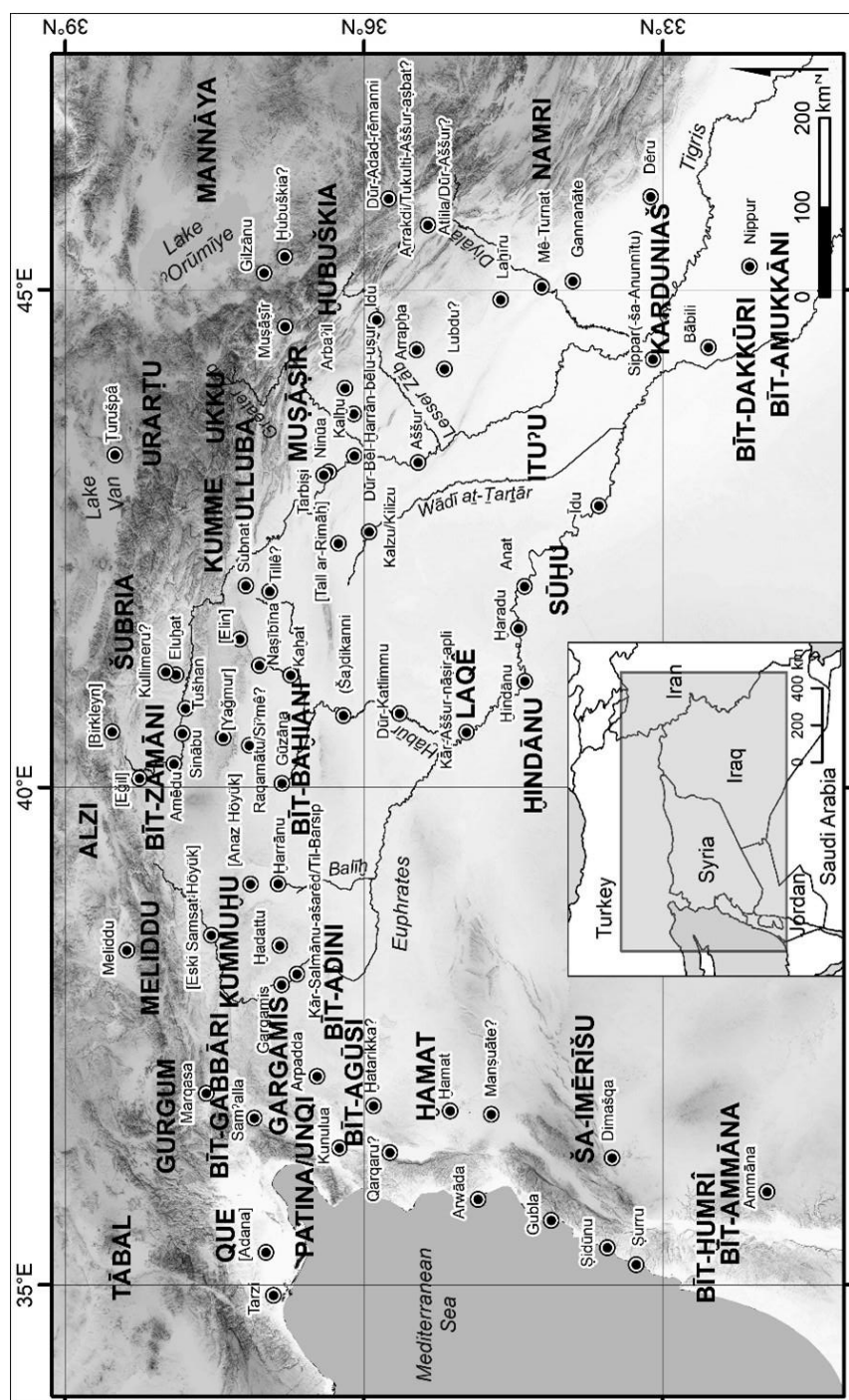


Fig. 1. A family tree of the Assyrian royal family (859–705) according to present knowledge (building upon Edmonds, 2025c: xv, fig. 1)



2. The ‘Great Expansion’ and its antecedents

Already in Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s earliest surviving inscription (the so-called Iran Stele of 737), his role as an unprecedented territorial expansionist is emphasised (RINAP 1, TP 35 ii 18’–21’):

ana-ku^m tukul-ti-A-é-šar-ra MAN KUR-*aš+šur šá* TA È^d UTU-ši EN ŠÚ^d
UTU-ši KUR^{meš} DÙ-ši-na ŠU^{II}-ía *ik-šú-da* KI MAN^{meš}-ni AD^{meš}-a *la e-*
ti-qa ^{giš}*mu-ger-ra-šú-nu áš-ta-kan* ^{lu}GAR^{meš}

I, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra (IV*), king of Assyria, who seized all lands from the sunset to sunrise, imposed governors upon places across which the chariots of my royal ancestors never traversed.

The terrific pace and concertedness of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s annexations certainly substantiate these claims, but also raise the question as to his motivations in initiating what Frahm (2023: 138–151) has dubbed the “Great Expansion”.

The structuralist explanation would be that territorial expansion was central to an Assyrian royal ‘ideology’, and thus that Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* was merely emulating his successful ancestors. As he would annex much of the Levant, so had his forbears Aššur-nāšir-apli II and Salmānu-ašarēd III already washed their weapons in the Mediterranean in hallowed custom (e.g. Garelli, 1991).¹⁴ As Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* had attained Babylonian kingship, so had a range of antecedents sought it—from Tukultī-Ninurta I to his own father Adad-nārārī III (with varying success). This argument, however, rests upon a truism: The oft-touted commandment to “expand the land” (*māta ruppūšu*) in Assyrian “coronation hymns” (e.g. Liverani, 2017a: 5–6; 2017b: 13–14) need not refer merely to military conquest, but rather also to agricultural infrastructural expansion of cultivated land,¹⁵ with regular—notionally expansionless—campaigning fulfilling the Assyrian king’s martial obligations (Edmonds, 2025c: 25–27, 68–71).¹⁶ Moreover, such a stance fails to explain the virtual absence of concrete Assyrian territorial expansion in the century prior to Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s reign (e.g. Bagg, 2017: 269)—were the Assyrian monarch swain to such imperative, then obvious territorial expansion would at least be claimed in royal inscriptions of the era, were it not to have occurred in practice.

¹⁴ On this royal practice in the *longue durée*, see Rollinger, 2012.

¹⁵ For example, an inscription of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s own father Adad-nārārī III (RIMA 3, 0.104.6: 8–9) juxtaposes the expansion of his land by the gods with them rendering his “shepherdship fine like a healing plant for the people of Assyria” (*kīma šamme balāti eli nišī māt-Aššur uṣibbuma*). As no extension of his realm’s borders can be evidenced for this king’s reign, agrarian colonisation is presumably meant.

¹⁶ This resolves thereby the tension between an ostensibly all-conquering Assyrian ideology and the care with which annexation occurred in practice (e.g. Parker, 2015: 286).

Nowhere is the lack of Assyrian territorial expansion prior to Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* more telling than in the west. A crowning achievement of the early Neo-Assyrian period was the defeat and incorporation of the Aramean polity of Bīt-Adini on the ‘Great Bend’ of the Upper Euphrates, concluded with Salmānu-ašarēd III’s conquest of Masuwari/Til-Barsip (Tall ʿAḥmar, Syria) on its left bank in 856 and the surrender of Bīt-Adini’s remaining forces and their leader Aḫūnu a year later at the mountain of Šitamrat. This had been the culmination of a series of brutal campaigns against both Bīt-Adini and the neighbouring state of Gargamis (Karkamış, Turkey / Ġarablūs, Syria) which must already have begun in the final years of the preceding Assyrian king Aššur-nāšir-apli II, perhaps as early as 862 (Fuchs / Edmonds, 2024). Aḫūnu is accorded a particular prominence in the Assyrian inscriptions including something of a back-story, suggesting that he was an old and tenacious foe (Edmonds, 2025c: 277–278). Certainly, Salmānu-ašarēd III’s siege of Masuwari/Til-Barsip lasted some two years (Fuchs, 2008b: 60). This war’s importance is demonstrated by its concurrence with hostilities with the northern kingdom of Urartu which may well have been more strategically pressing; furthermore, it was commemorated not only in the famous bronze bands of the gates from Imgur-Enlil (Balāwāt, Iraq) and in royal inscriptions, but also within heroic Assyrian royal lays intended to be recited throughout the kingdom. One of these latter paeans revealingly presents the Assyrian king’s orders to his *turtānu* (field marshal) Aššur-bēlu-ka¹⁷ in the wake of the capture of Masuwari/Til-Barsip as follows (RIMA 3, 0.102.17: 11–12/SAA 3, 17: 11–12):¹⁷

uruḪAL.ŠU^{meš} lu pa-aq-dan-nik-ka lu dan-nat EN.NUN-ka / lu-u KALAG-an
ri-kis-ka mu-ḥur bi-lat-su-nu / mal-ku ša ^{kur}ḫat-ti ina ĠIR^{II}.MU ú-šak-ni-su /
lul-lik ša ^{kur}ur-ar-ṭa-a-a lu-u-mur qa-rab-šú-nu

The forts are entrusted to you! May your vigilance be keen / and your organisation strong! Receive their tribute! / Ḫatti’s prince I’ve prostrated at my feet / let me hither to the Urartians, to see them fence!

At this juncture, the king marches against Urartu. The fortification and guarding of a new border at the Euphrates are here lionised (see §4), rather than any further expansion.¹⁸ Certainly, Masuwari/Til-Barsip’s conquest marked a crucial turning point in Assyria’s territorial expansion; save a few outposts’ seizure, Salmānu-ašarēd III’s frequent expeditions west of the Euphrates in the subsequent decades yielded no tangible gains in spite of abundant opportunity for the annexation of individual Levantine polities (Edmonds, 2025c: 60–61, 289–297).

¹⁷ On account of its fragmentary preservation, is not entirely certain that this work was composed for Salmānu-ašarēd III, rather than his father Aššur-nāšir-apli II (Reade, 1989).

¹⁸ This composition was still read at Ḫuzīrīna (Sultantepe, Turkey) in the late 7th century, demonstrating the Assyrian cultural memory of these 9th-century kings as glorious campaigners, territorial consolidators, and tribute recipients, but hardly as expansionists.

The reasons for this could be argued to be pragmatic; during this era, Assyrian sieges of cities generally required two or three years apiece to complete (Fuchs, 2008b), rendering systematic Assyrian conquest of the Levant a daunting, potentially multigenerational prospect.¹⁹ Yet, this does not explain why thereafter Salmānu-ašarēd III so regularly (16 times in three decades) and fruitlessly expended men, moment, and materiel on sallies beyond the Euphrates about the results of which Assyrian royal inscriptions are tellingly laconic (Edmonds, 2025c: 291–295).²⁰ Each was met by a coalition of otherwise internecine Levantine states, which could collectively repel even the largest of Assyrian hosts, against which Salmānu-ašarēd III seems to have been unable or unwilling to innovate. Yet, he could have patiently reduced one adversary after the next as he had Bīt-Adini, but he did not—lost would presumably be the siphoned riches of a burgeoning Levantine trade under envisaged Assyrian thumb, and thus he was playing for all or naught. This reveals a profounder insight into Salmānu-ašarēd III's *Westpolitik*: he was willing to accept the established Early Iron-age patchwork order of Levantine kingdoms and city states provided it acknowledged him as hegemon. When the region did not, he repeatedly sought to best its salient political actors on the battlefield with little success.²¹ This cycle ended only with Salmānu-ašarēd III's infirmity from 831 onwards, spelling two decades of Assyrian internal political turmoil during which the Levant was roundly forgot.²²

Salmānu-ašarēd III's disastrous western dealings stand in bold contrast to those of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* less than a century later, which showcase a remarkable virtuosity. The latter ruler faced coalitions the like of which had opposed his great grandfather, but he deftly countered them through a mixture of military and diplomatic outmanoeuvring. This is most manifest in his defeat of a northern Levantine confederation headed by Sarduri II of Urartu and Matī'il of Arpad/Bīt-Agūsi and including Sulumal of Meliddu and Tarḫulara of Gurgum which had assembled in Kummuhu in 743.²³ This coalition's genesis and the instigation of the conflict differ between one (fragmentary) source and another,²⁴

¹⁹ Liverani (2004: 219) considered this, but concluded rather that the 'ideological' border offered by the Euphrates' 'Great Bend' prompted the cessation to Assyrian expansion.

²⁰ Any concrete information rendered is of the cheery, misleading sort with which Assyrian inscriptions frame setbacks (Edmonds, 2025c: 293–295), e.g. 853's charming *nāḫiru*-hunt after the repulse at Qarqaru (Tall Qarqūr, Syria), or 841's creation of rock reliefs following abortive assault of Dimašqa (Dimašq, Syria); Assyrian casualties remain unthematized.

²¹ 'Soft' campaigns to unchallenging regions between such western forays suggest that the Assyrian army had often reached its breaking point in the process (Edmonds, 2025c: 291).

²² This period witnessed a succession war (826–820), followed by Šamšī-Adad V's reign, during which local Levantine rulers ignored tribute obligations (RIMA 3, 0.104.6: 13–15).

²³ The extant sources are tacit as to the polity of Kummuhu's actual role in these events.

²⁴ Compare the differing accounts of RINAP 1, TP 9: 2'–6'; 35 i 21'–43'; 39: 20–21; 47 o. 45–50 and the İncirli Stele, and studies by Astour, 1979 and Novotny, 2023: 366–371.

but it is evident that Matī'il courted various northern Levantine rulers prior to its formation, and that the plan was to take the fight to Assyria with Urartian aid. It is thus noteworthy that Uriaikki, the ruler of the Cilician polity of Que, sided with Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*, leaving the rear of the Urartō-Levantine pact's territory vulnerable.²⁵ Surviving accounts do not mention Sam'alla or Gargamis, but their neutrality would also have been a setback to the coalition. By the end of the conflict, Sam'alla possessed a new ruler, Panammû (II), whose own fanatically pro-Assyrian son Bar-Rākkib claimed that Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* had installed his father on Sam'alla's throne after being approached by him with a tribute (ALASP 6, P: 172–173). All of this suggests that Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* had stymied the Urartō-Levantine coalition diplomatically before even meeting them on the battlefield. When pursuing the latter, it was also with the element of surprise. While the coalition had formed a combined force in Kummuhu, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s accounts suggest that he successfully divided them by means of a forced march (e.g. RINAP 1, TP 35 i 27'–34'):

7 KASKAL.[GÍD *qaq-qa-ru*] GE₆ *u ur-¹ru¹ al-li-ka-am-ma* ERIM^{hi.a}-*at KUR-*
*aš+šur^{ki} ¹ul ¹ú¹-šap-ši-¹i¹-ma ¹A^{meš¹} *ul áš-qí uš-ma-ni ul GAR-¹un¹-ma ¹ul¹*
ak-šu-ra KARAŠ-ši ERIM^{hi.a}-ia ¹an¹-hu-su-¹nu¹ [TA-šú]-¹nu am¹-da-¹hi-iš
BADs.BADs-šú-nu GAR-un uš-ma-ni ¹KARAŠ¹-su-¹nu e¹-kim-šú-nu-ti a-na
šu-zu-ub ZI^{meš¹}-[šú-nu] ZÁ^{meš¹}-ma^{md} 15-BĀD^{kur}URI-a-a e-de-nu-[uš-šu ina
*MÍ.ANŠE].KUR.RA ¹U⁵-[ma] GE₆-iš *ip-pá-riš-ma [...]***

I marched seven leagues of land by night and day. I did not permit my soldiers to rest, nor pour them water. I did not pitch camp or bivouac for the sake of my soldiers' weariness. I inflicted a defeat upon them (scil. the coalition). I deprived them of their camp and bivouac. They fled order to save their lives. Riding alone aback a mare, Sarduri the Urartian flew by night. [...]

The trope of the heroic forced march first appears here within the corpus of Assyrian royal inscriptions, the novelty suggesting its verity. In this engagement's wake, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* initially pursued the Urartians, and then proceeded to Gurgum to 'mop up' the remaining confederates, concluding with the laying of siege to Arpadda. Here, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* again distinguished himself from by Salmānu-ašarēd III by doggedly besieging this key city until its capture three years later in 741, rather than contenting himself with his great-grandfather's momentary power-projections through abortive poliorcetics.²⁶

²⁵ Recurrently in Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s reign, opponents were strategically skewered through deft diplomacy. The present author thanks Andreas Fuchs for this observation.

²⁶ Compare Elayi's (2022: 64) assessment: "Tiglath-pileser probably did appropriate some strategic ideas developed by his predecessors such as in his Syrian campaign, which reminds us of that of Shalmaneser III."

Nonetheless, he was compelled to revisit the city in 740, presumably to retake it from a rebellion, although no annalistic account is preserved. The resultant conflict must have been bitter and perhaps costly to Assyria,²⁷ and explains 738, perhaps the most defining year in Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s reign, and Assyria’s trajectory as a state. The king marched to the northern Levant expressly to impose a new Assyrian provincial order upon a large swathe thereof. Headquartering in Arpad, he commanded tribute from his vassals, and then seized the unsuspecting king Tutammū of Patina on the grounds of a perceived treaty infraction and occupied his realm (RINAP 1, TP 12: 3’–6’). More conquest farther south in Ḥamat and on the coast ensued, and then the king supervised an enormous movement of populations (see §4, tab. 3). Simultaneously to his activities in the west, various Assyrian magnates had undertaken minor campaigns in Babylonia and the Zagros with the express purpose of obtaining deportees, so that an exchange of peoples parallel to the erection of novel Assyrian provinces could occur (Sano, 2020: 182–187). The majority of Levantines (some 83,000) were sent to the Upper Tigris, which had suffered depopulation from decades of warfare with neighbouring Urartu (Edmonds, 2025c: 227–228), but others were sent further afield. At the close of this colossal exchange of peoples, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* asserted his dominance among his vassals with a second round of tribute-receipt (RINAP 1, TP 14: 10–12; 15: 1–5). It had been an immense logistical-political gamble—despite dividing his forces between different theatres, the Assyrian king had still annexed a vast space and replaced much of its population without any resistance. The final result was a great provincial welt from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean, effectively separating south-eastern Anatolia from the southern Levant: *divide et impera*.

Although only fragmentarily preserved and thus difficult to reconcile with biblical accounts (see esp. Tadmor, 1994: 273–282; Dubovský, 2006), the king’s second round of Levantine conquest from 734 to 732 evidently obeyed a like pattern of keenly calculated warfare and diplomacy. Here, what seems to have been a second coalition was confounded by Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s intervention in a local regional conflict (the so-called “Syro-Ephraimite War”),²⁸ the king encircling Raḥiānu (biblical Rēzîn) of Dimašqa by cutting through Pilištu in 734, and then determinedly besieging his capital in 733 and 732 until final submission. A fascinating window into this latter event is presented by an enigmatic remark following an excerpt from a seemingly unrelated hymn to Ištar preserved on a literary tablet hailing from House N3 at Aššur (SAA 23, 231, o. 3–r. 3):

²⁷ 739 witnessed a comparatively paltry campaign against the Zagrine land of Ulluba connected to the quelling of a rebellion in the Assyrian province of Ḥalzi-atbāri.

²⁸ As with Panammū’s gift to Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*, the king of Yaudu (Yōhō)ʾāhāz (II) (Iaū-ḥazi in Assyrian sources) is claimed in the Bible to have offered a gift in return for Assyrian intervention (2 Kings 16: 7–8; 2 Chron 28: 16).

ina tar-ši^m tukul-A-É.ŠÁR.RA LUGAL KUR-aš-šur^{ki} [LUGAL?] ḥa-as-su^d UZU-ú-a ina šat mu-ši [ú-š]ab-ri-šú-ma MU^{meš} an-nu-ti [ana^{kur/uru} di-maš-q]a[?] ina UGU-ḥi it-[ta-lak[?] ITI x UD]^f 5¹.KÁM lim-mu^m aš-šur-KALAGⁱ [n-an-ni¹]úGAR KUR KUR-za-mu-a

In the reign of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra (IV*), king of Aššur, the wise [sovereign], Šerū'a [re]vealed to him these signs during the night watch. On account of these, he ma[r]ched to Dimašq[a?] on the 5th [(month lost)], in the eponymate of Aššur-da^{??}in[anni], governor of Māzamūa (733).

This presently unique text suggests that auspicious omens for Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s intended siege of Dimašqa were proclaimed in Assyria prior to his departure, and thereafter preserved for posterity; the seasoned king had particularly staked his divine legitimacy on his enterprise's success.²⁹ Provincialisation and mass deportation ensued, and a range of vassal agreements were closed with rulers surrounding this great Assyrian Levantine swathe.³⁰ Ḥamat was territorially reduced (Bagg, 2011: 216–217), perhaps through humiliating vassalage imposed in the eleventh hour.³¹

The marked discrepancies between the approaches of Salmānu-ašarēd III and Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* to the same theatre are enough to discern completely different governing logics—to situate them within the same expansionist trajectory is to abstract their purposes to inutility.³² The former was content to retain a local political constellation (whether in the west, Babylonia, or the Zagros) provided that he was its hegemon, and sought pursued this with brute force. The latter sought to impose an entirely novel order upon his theatres of operation, and did so with military-diplomatic guile. Yet, were Salmānu-ašarēd III's doings not to have inspired the 'Great Expansion' (unless negatively), then the question remains as to Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s own motivations. The politics of the intervening period—the remainder of the Assyrian 'Entr'acte' prior to 745—must be scoured for insight.

²⁹ The distraction unbrooked testifies thereto: Babylonia's tumultuous 'year of three kings' in 732 was an ideal pretence for Assyrian annexation, yet this was postponed to 731.

³⁰ The most famous such agreement was with Awsēa' (biblical *Hôšēa'*) who replaced Paqaḥa (biblical *Peqah*) on the throne of Bīt-Ḥumri (Dubovský, 2006: 166), but more intriguing is that with the Arabian queen Samsi, upon whom was foisted some 10,000 Assyrian soldiers as supervision (RINAP 1, TP 42: 25'–27'; 49 r. 21–22).

³¹ RINAP 1, 13: 7–11; 14: 10; 31: 1–9. The retention of a humbled Ḥamatite kingship backfired when Iaū-bi'dī assumed the throne following Salmānu-ašarēd VI*'s death and massacred the region's Assyrians (see esp. RINAP 2, 81: 4–20; discussion: Frahm, 2013).

³² Indeed, the same disparity is evident for the Zagros mountains, where Salmānu-ašarēd III struggled to retain Namri as a vassal, while Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* erected a chain of provinces, or Babylonia, where the former sought intervention, and the latter conquest.

Here, an Assyrian *modus operandi* entirely different those of either aforementioned king is evident both in the west (and elsewhere), beginning with the accession of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s father Adad-nārārī III in 811, while still a minor. The boy-king’s realm was administered his mother Sammu-rāmat, who seems to have been a daughter of Babylonia’s ruling dynasty, which hailed from the Diyālā, and was West Semitic in background (Edmonds, 2025c: 260–263). Certainly, the era is characterised by an influx of Babylonian culture into Assyria (Lehmann 1901), and discernible is a commensurate shift in governance, with the Assyrian king assuming the traditionally Babylonian role of land-arbiter, complete with *kudurru*-stelae. This neatly explains the appearance from 805 onwards of Assyrian border-stelae in the west called *taḥūmu*, perhaps an Aramaic calque of *kudurru*.³³ Rather than seeking to impose hegemony ‘from above’, Adad-nārārī III and his successors assailed a mediating role in the region, intervening in limited campaigns for the benefit of allies, and thus cultivating—rather than demanding—loyalty, and rebuilding this relationship ‘from the ground upwards’, which seems also to have featured cultic displays.³⁴ At its height, this policy of diplomacy and patiently selected battles enabled Adad-nārārī III’s forcible commanding of a rich tribute from Dimašqa (the circumstances of which remain opaque; see Edmonds, 2025c: 295–296), but its weakness lay in its labour-intensity for the Assyrian monarch;³⁵ an interruption such as a civil war in Assyria could spell disaster for patiently cultivated diplomatic ties.³⁶

Pertinent in this regard is the mysterious Bar-Ga’ya, king (*mlk*) of the still obscure land of *ktk*, in the Aramaic-language treaties with Maṭī’il of Arpadda/Bīt-Agūsi carved upon the stelae found at as-Safīra, Syria.³⁷ The recent identification of the name *Aššur-dān* (III) invoked as “great king” in one of these texts (Dušek, 2019) substantiates what the list of Assyro-Babylonian divinities invoked in these treaties long suggested, namely that Bar-Ga’ya—whose name “son of majesty” could well be an epithet—was at least an Assyrianised, if not Assyrian royal.³⁸

³³ Both can mean ‘border’ or ‘border stele’—compare the İncirli Stele’s *gbl* (line 1).

³⁴ This is suggested by the Assyrian reliefs at Karabur, Turkey, which were carved by a eunuch—presumably Šamšī-ilu—at a ritual site far beyond Assyria’s pale at some point during the early 8th century (Edmonds, 2025c: 296–297); the subsequent association of the legendary Semiramis with the cult of Aphrodite at Hieropolis Bambyke (Mambiğ, Syria), may well also suggest Sammu-rāmat’s patronage (Frahm, 2020: 51).

³⁵ Westward expeditions were also liable to return with the plague (Edmonds, 2025c: 296).

³⁶ Moreover, this (perhaps necessarily) defanged policy may well have permitted the emergence of competing regional powers such as the expansive state established by Ḥazā’ēl of Dimašqa during the late 9th century (see e.g. Younger [Jr.], 2016, 620–632).

³⁷ See extensive discussion by Younger [Jr.], 2016: 537–545, to which might now particularly be added Na’aman, 2016: 81–82; Ponchia / Lanfranchi, 2024: 155–159.

³⁸ The *turtānu* Šamšī-ilu’s long-suggested identity with Bar-Ga’ya (e.g. Lemaire / Durand, 1984; Soden, 1985) could not be upheld, were he to have been a eunuch, as Bar-Ga’ya’s

The latter is more likely considering the deities mentioned,³⁹ and the similarities in language between these treaties and the contemporary Aramaic-language treaty between a local Zagrine ruler and what must be Assyria recorded in a stele discovered at Qalāyčī, Iran (the so-called Bukān Stele).⁴⁰ It may well be that scions of the Assyrian royal house were installed in vassal kings on Assyria's fringes so as to shore up precisely these kinds of diplomatic relationships.

Three distinct eras of Assyrian western engagement thus emerge: Salmānu-ašarēd III's ill-fated pursuit of hegemony over existing political constellations (856–826), a subsequent epoch of 'soft power'-politics and minimalist intervention (811–754), and finally Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s comprehensive imperial project (743–732). As priorly intimated, these echo general Assyrian foreign policy in each respective periods, and thusly suggest Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s fundamental radicalness of approach. Here, comparison to his elder (half?)brother Aššur-nārārī V's chequered reign is instructive (755–747; see Table 2).

Table 2. The reign of Aššur-nārārī V (755–747)

Date	Event	Source
755	Aššur-dān III dies. Campaign to Ḫatarikka	SAAS 2, B1: 64'; B2: 59'
754	Campaign to Arpadda. "Return from Aššur"	SAAS 2, B1: 65'–66'; B2: 60'–61'
753	Ep. Aššur-nārārī (V). No campaign (<i>ina māti</i>)	SAAS 2, B1: 67'; B2: 62'
752	3 rd ep. Šamši-ilu. No campaign (<i>ina māti</i>)	SAAS 2, A1 iv 17; A3 ii 3'; A4 i 2; A8 iv 6; B1: 68'; B2: 63'
751	No campaign (<i>ina māti</i>)	SAAS 2, B1: 69'; B2: 64'
750	No campaign (<i>ina māti</i>)	SAAS 2, B1: 70'; B2: 65'
749	Campaign to Namri	SAAS 2, B1: 71'; B2: 66'
748	Campaign to Namri	SAAS 2, B1: 72'
747	No campaign (<i>ina māti</i>). Aššur-nārārī V succeeds Salmānu-ašarēd V*.	SAAS 2, B1: 73'; RIMA 3, 0.105.2: 9 (erasure)

progeny are explicitly thematised in the as-Safira inscriptions. Šamši-ilu's eunuchry is suggested by a beardless individual on the 'Antakya Stele' (RIMA 3, 0.104.2) commissioned by himself and the king Adad-nārārī III, who faces a bearded figure who must logically be the king (even though both are wearing the same court dress).

³⁹ All belonging to the 8th-century Neo-Assyrian 'state' pantheon (Na'aman 2016: 81 with bib.)—note especially the sequence [Aššur,] Mulissu, Marduk, Zarpanītum.

⁴⁰ See Liverani, 2008. Aššur-dān III's absence in the other treaties could reflect the insurrection instigated by Tukultī-apil-Ešarra III*, which rove Assyria between 763 and 758, thus leaving Bar-Ga'ya semi-autonomous during this period (Edmonds, 2025: 297).

Historical assessment of Aššur-nārārī V's reign is overwhelmingly negative. Certainly, he inherited a still-weakened realm from his brother Aššur-dān III, whose own rule had never truly recovered from the rebellion incited in 762 by their uncle, the upstart Tukultī-apil-Ešarra III*. Yet, campaigning had resumed with expeditions to Ḫatarikka (755) and Arpadda (754), and some optimism might have prevailed.⁴¹ Might Aššur-nārārī V's incumbency warrant historical revision?

Consider the west: Conventionally, Aššur-nārārī V's defeat at the hands of the Urartian king Sarduri II—laconically mentioned in the latter's inscriptions (CTU A 9-1 l.e. 1-16; 9-2 l.e. 1-16)—is connected with 754's Arpadda campaign (SAAS 2, B1: 65'-66'; B2: 60'-61'); the four years without Assyrian campaigning thereafter would thus have resulted from this defeat, during which time Urartu would have dominated the northern Levant (e.g. Radner, 2021: 387).⁴² Yet, this narrative is challenged by an absence of polities south of Kummuhu in Sarduri II's inscriptions,⁴³ an extant treaty between Aššur-nārārī V and Matī'il (SAA 2, 2), and the implication in both Assyrian sources and the Incirli Stele that Matī'il and his confederates were nominal Assyrian vassals prior to Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s westward campaign of 743.⁴⁴ Something more seems here afoot.

In turn, a *kudurru* fragment of Aššur-nārārī V found at Aššur (RIMA 3, 0.107.1) mentions a predecessor installing a local ruler as king (*a-na* LUGAL-ú-ti), whom Aššur-nārārī V had now replaced with one Marduk-šarru-ušur, an (Assyrian) governor (*a-na* ^{lu}EN.[NAM?]). This is the only unambiguous territorial expansion (however informal) by an Assyrian king for the entire 'Entr'acte' (855–745).⁴⁵ This annexation's theatre is unclear, but probably the Zagros.⁴⁶ This begs a tantalising question—was territorial expansion already being mooted in Aššur-nārārī V's Assyria, but years before Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s rise to power?

⁴¹ The enigmatic remark *ištu Aššur tayyārtu* "return from Aššur" in 754's Eponym Chronicle-entry suggests that the court lingered at Assyria's traditional enthronement-site after its reconquest from Tukultī-apil-Ešarra III* in late 762 so as to block any other claimant from assuming kingship (Edmonds, 2025c: 157); if so, then the long-serving field marshal Šamšī-ilu was convinced enough of Aššur-nārārī V's abilities to end this policy.

⁴² The present author recently doubted this equation, but nonetheless maintained it with some misgivings in his own historical reconstruction (Edmonds, 2025c: 47, 157, 162).

⁴³ Indeed, Radner (2021: 387) is at a loss to explain why Sarduri II did not press his advantage as supposed hegemon of the northern Levant.

⁴⁴ Certainly, Panammû (II) of Sam'alla brought gifts to the Assyrian court—presumably prior to 743—so as to convince the king to enact regime change (KAI 215: 6–7).

⁴⁵ Note, however, Igištu-ēreš' self-impelled seizure of Anat (Edmonds, 2024c: 77–78).

⁴⁶ Aššur-nārārī V's Assyrian royal ancestor (LUGAL *a*-bi*) had installed the previous ruler meaning that this could only be in recent decades can only be Adad-nārārī III, who is known to have campaigned to Namri (RIMA 3, 0.104.8: 5–11; see also CUSAS 17, 75), much as Aššur-nārārī V would nigh his reign's end (749 and 748).

With the discovery of the previously unidentified Assyrian king Salmānu-ašarēd V* (747–745),⁴⁷ Aššur-nārārī V's death can now be placed in 747, which suggests the Zagrine campaigns of 749 and 748 as another potential arena for Sarduri II's defeat of the Assyrian monarch. In such a reconstruction, Aššur-nārārī V would have pursued territorial annexation in the Zagros which brought him into conflict with Urartian interests and culminated in a military rout. Might, then, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s 'Great Expansion' have an ill-fated antecedent?

On the 13th Ayyāru 745, having gained hold of the Assyrian capital at Aššur, the Assyrian prince Pūlu was enthroned *Tukultī-apil-Ešarra*. When he departed for his kingdom's southern border to campaign against Aramean tribes marauding the Wādī aṭ-Ṭartār five months later in Tašrītu (VII) 745 (RINAP 1, TP 4), this must initially have seemed little more than a policing action, even when he followed them into Babylonian territory. Yet, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s march southwards did not halt, and he proceeded as far south as Uqnū River (Rūd-e Kārūn) with the Persian Gulf on the horizon (RINAP 1, TP 5: 7–8; 39: 5–6; 40: 8–9; 45; 47 o. 9; 51: 8; 52: 8). This conquered territory was annexed (RINAP 1, TP 5: 11–12), its population decreed Assyrian, an unnamed eunuch assigned as governor, a new city begun at Ḥumut, canals excavated, and of tens of thousands of Arameans deported (RINAP 1, TP 5; 6: 1–6). The comprehensiveness of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s annexation, which completely transformed the targeted region, is remarkably unprecedented (see §4). The following year, Namri received similar treatment, and most revealingly, its rulers were under no illusions, as uniquely phrased in one passage (RINAP 1, TP 7: 10–12):

ᵐba-at-ta-a-nu DUMU ᵐkap-si [...] -tu ik-nu-uš-ma iš-šá-a tup-šik-ku a-na la sa-pa-aḥ na-gi-i-šú ᵐkar-ka-ri-ḥu-un-dir e-zi-ba-áš-šu [... UGU]-šú áš-kun

Battānu, "son" of Kapsi [...] submitted and performed corvée, lest his district be dispersed. I left him Karkariḥundir. [...] I installed over him [(an official)]

Battānu's submission for the sake of his people's cohesion suggests foreknowledge of the complete demographic transformation awaiting the uncooperative; Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s price was a 'downsizing' (*vide* Ḥamat) to a single city under Assyrian supervision. This starkly contrasts with Aššur-nārārī V's mere replacement of local executive power but a half-decade before in likely the same region, the method of which obeys the early Neo-Assyrian model of 'silent annexation' of semi-provincialised vassals (Edmonds, 2025c: 83). Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s wholesale annexations were something very new.

⁴⁷ For Salmānu-ašarēd V*, see Edmonds, 2025c: 158–162; Edmonds / Frahm, 2026: 36–46; supposing him Aššur-nārārī V's son neatly explains the Assyrian King List's incorrect statement that Aššur-nārārī V was Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s father as a redactional error. That *Salmānu-ašarēd* was twice a throne name in the same generation also seems unlikely.

Thus, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s territorial expansions with their full 'imperial package' of provincialisation and mass deportation are evident from the very beginning of his reign, but are also entirely without precedent in the centuries prior to his reign, where very different political-strategic logics prevailed. This demolishes the structuralist assessment of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* as a continuation of a longstanding Assyrian expansionist policy, but also raises a new, fascinating question: What was Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s inspiration for this revolutionary doctrine? Were prior kings not to have informed this, might an answer lie in his dealings with Assyria's elites?

3. Pūlu and the magnates

Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s relationship with his own high officials has been a central point of contention in his reign's assessment. While some authors (e.g. Frahm, 2017: 177; Elayi, 2022: 49–60) posit a reduction in the powers of Assyria's highest echelons following his accession, continuity in their standing has also been argued (Jones, 2021: 235–246). Again, not only the scarcity of sources influences this debate, but also their framing and analysis. In the following, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s relationship to his elites will be re-examined.

Controversy attends reconstruction of the political history of the expansionless Assyrian Entr'acte (855–745) prior to Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s reign (e.g. Baker, 2023: 290–291). The first interpretive camp understands this period's non-royal monumental inscriptions and tacitness on the monarch's part as evidence of stagnation, internal politicking, and feeble kings ruled by their inferiors (e.g. Grayson, 1993; 1999; Fuchs, 2008a; Edmonds, 2025c: 131–162). Such a reading brings the era's various crises to the fore. Contrastingly, a second, revisionist school has downplayed these elements, imagining a phase of consolidation germinal to the late 8th century's imperial adventure (e.g. Dalley, 2000). Hereby, any devolution was a conscious strategy by the king (Siddall, 2013: 81–132), and his high officials' personal monuments honoured him (Blocher, 2001).⁴⁸ The weak king beholden to underlings is dismissed as modern 'orientalism' (Bernbeck, 2008: 361), and the Assyrian state's resilience emphasised.

⁴⁸ Compare Fales, 2012: 137: "I believe that, in the absence of any and all indications from the age of Adad-nerari III, whether from the administrative archives of Kalhu and Guzana or from the official monuments and inscriptions of the time, that anything was (or had gone) amiss in royal programs, we are justified in looking for a deeper and more sophisticated historical "key" to this crucial intermediate period (which fell between the all-out conquest policy of the 9th century and the rational organization of the subjected areas at the end of the 8th) than the one portended by the currently accepted image of crisis and indecision "at the top" while centrifugal energies were left free to expand "below"."

Decisive in both factions' arguments has been the period's wealth of non-royal inscribed objects (from seals to stelae) and their language (Zaia, 2018). For the first camp, these are erosions of royal prerogative; for the second, they testify to Assyria's floruit under devolution. Contextualisation is necessary, and a scheme emerges in the *longue durée*: In Assyria, extant commemorative inscriptions are nigh-invariably royal, and Late Bronze-age exceptions correlate with periods of state weakness,⁴⁹ rendering cogent a waning of royal power during the Assyrian Entr'acte. As such commemorative texts are nigh-unattested from Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s reign onwards, a curtailing of elite privilege suggests itself.⁵⁰

Yet, exceptions exist: In northern Syria, private cuneiform and alphabetic funerary inscriptions on bricks or stelae are attested both in the Middle and Neo-Assyrian periods;⁵¹ one surviving example was even partially cribbed from a royal inscription.⁵² A further curio is one Bēl-iddina's inscribed votive stele to Adad discovered at Turlu Höyük (RINAP 2, 2011), some 35 km northwest of Gargamis as the crow flies,⁵³ which evidently postdates 745, and probably the latter city's fall to Šarru-ukīn in 717,⁵⁴ although a post-Assyrian dating cannot be excluded.⁵⁵ In turn, time's vicissitudes cannot be disregarded as an explanation for the present distribution of non-royal commemorative inscriptions; by the same token, regional, chronological, or artefactual idiosyncrasy might even be at work.

⁴⁹ Thus, the texts of the self-styled "kings of Māri" ruling from Tābetu (Tall Tābān, Syria) during the turbulent 12th century (Shibata, 2012), or the 10th-century inscription of Bēl-ēreš (RIMA 2, 0.96.2001), hereditary governor of nearby (Ša)dikanni (Tall 'Ağāğa, Syria).

⁵⁰ E.g. Frahm, 2017: 177: "From now on, Assyrian high officials and military officers, as a rule, no longer had the right to commission inscriptions written in their own names (...)"

⁵¹ These are recently discussed by Ridder, 2024; Frahm, 2026b.

⁵² This is the statue of Kammā-kī found at Tall Ḥalaf (Röllig, 2003; Edmonds, 2025: 182).

⁵³ As already noted by Frahm (2017: 177), and restated by Elayi (2022: 59, fn. 63).

⁵⁴ The late Neo-Assyrian date is suggested by the writing, along with the fact that Gargamis did not fall to Assyria until 717 (Balcıoğlu / Mayer, 2006: 180–181).

⁵⁵ The latest canonical governor of Gargamis is Aḥu-ilāya (ep. 649; see SAAS 2, A3 v 11'; Millard, 1994: 80), but an unpublished cuneiform text found there (KH.17.O.450) refers to a governor Ilu-zēru-ukīn during the non-canonical eponymate of Geia (Zaccagnini, 2019: 40), which could well be extremely late as it is unattested within documentation in the Assyrian heartland (Reade, 1998: 256–257), and Babylonia first took Gargamis from an (Assyro?-)Egyptian force in 605 (ABC 5 o. 1–7). Compare in this regard the entirely Assyrian real estate document found near modern Hasankeyf (Toptaş / Akyüz, 2021) exceptionally dating to the 9th year of Lābaši, the chief cupbearer (*rab šāqē*), under the rule of the Mede Ubaki-isteri, Hērodotos' Kyaxares (Κυαξάρης) (Roaf, 2021), which must represent another post-Assyrian rump-state (see Edmonds, 2025: 229, incorrectly calling Lābaši eponym). Nonetheless, a suggestive eponym *Gargamisāya* dated by Parpola (apud Radner, 1998: xix) to 609*, which would bolster the notion of an Assyro-Egyptian Gargamisite rump-state, seems to be a ghost entry, as no eponym of that name (cf. Fabritius, 1999) appears within the Ma'allānāte corpus (Homès-Fredericq, 2018).

Indeed, an unusual, fragmentary document of Aššur-bāni-apli (SAA 12, 90) describes a eunuch Il-yāba dedicating land in the western village of Elumu to Sîn for the life of the king, presumably with a stele. In scandal's wake, Aššur-bāni-apli ordered apparently this same stele refashioned (NA₄.RÚ.A GIBIL-*eš ú-še-piš-ma*) so as to rededicate the village to Sîn.⁵⁶ Implicit is that late Neo-Assyrian officials created private monuments in at least some circumstances (Justement 2024: 153). As *kudurru*-stelae seem to have been introduced ere Adad-nārārī III's reign, this suggests that the creation of private commemorative monuments pertaining to land grants is not an indicator *per se* of weakened royal authority; excavation might yield examples from Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s reign yet.

By much the same token, the persistent inscriptional tradition within the Ḫābūr basin from the 12th to 9th centuries on the part of local potentates nominally subordinate to Assyrian king centres upon an object type evidently eschewed by Assyrian kings until Šarru-ukīn (Taylor, 2018: 38–40)—the clay cylinder. Had an Assyrian king even learnt of the creation of such texts, they would have been upon a medium unconnected to Assyrian kingship, and thus hardly have infringed royal prerogative.⁵⁷ Precisely this cylinder-tradition informs the famed Assyrianising anthropomorphic statue of the late 9th-century local-ruler king-cum-provincial-governor Adad-rēmāni/Hadad-yiṭī from Tall Faḥḥārīya, Syria (ancient Sikāni),⁵⁸ which bears a composite, bilingual inscription in alphabetic Aramaic and cuneiform Akkadian. Here, the cuneiform text carved on the governor's skirt perpendicular to the conventional direction of reading (and that of the Aramaic) is not so much archaism as a skeuomorphism, with the statue's lower half resembling a commemorative clay cylinder stood upright (i.e. as conventionally deposited). Thus, the governor had married an innocuous Assyrianising devotional statue of himself with a reappropriated local inscriptional tradition which was presumably tolerated, so as to express his own status within customary channels. This resonated with political reality: As hereditary ruler of the Aramaic state of Bīt-Baḥiāni/Gūzāna, Hadad-yiṭī's father Šamaš-nūrī/Sās-nūrī had made a compact with Aššur-nāšir-apli II in 868 to subsume his polity within the Assyrian provincial system in return for territorial concessions and his family's continued rule as governors (Edmonds, 2025c: 179–182) as an early Neo-Assyrian “transitional case” (Postgate, 1992: 256–257). As evident from its language, the earliest section comprising the statue's composite inscription must have been drafted by an aging scribe once of Aššur-nāšir-apli II's court (Edmonds, 2025c: 181–182), who would surely have eschewed any standing taboos.

⁵⁶ This was probably a draft of its commemorative inscription (Postgate, 1974: 2; Kataja / Whiting, 1995: xxxv–xxxvi); Elumu was not far from Gargamis (Bagg, 2020: 921–922).

⁵⁷ The only examples known from the Assyrian heartland hail from the enigmatic non-Assyrian (late Middle?) Bronze-age king Irišti-enni of Kunsihhe (Edmonds, 2025c: 186).

⁵⁸ This was created at some point between 843 and 808 (Edmonds, 2025c: 180–181).

This contrasts with a contemporary inscription on a votive statue illegally excavated nearby at Tall ‘Aḡāḡa (Frahm, 2015) commissioned by the *turtānu* Dayyān-Aššur in 826. No local, he had imposed his rule here through hierarchical authority (Edmonds, 2025c: 244); after service as Salmānu-ašarēd III’s field marshal for a quarter-century,⁵⁹ he led Assyria’s campaigns himself from his king’s infirmity in 831 onwards. The era’s royal inscriptions overtly credit Dayyān-Aššur as leader, and are chronologically and narratively construed from his, rather than the king’s perspective (Yamada, 2000: 325–328; Fuchs, 2008a: 65).⁶⁰ Indeed, one thereof, the Black Obelisk (RIMA 3, 0.102.14) was erected near a tellingly unfinished statue of a eunuch (Reade, 1981: 159)—Dayyān-Aššur himself? The finely carved Tall ‘Aḡāḡa-statue’s conventionally oriented inscription surpasses even this, recounting only Dayyān-Aššur’s campaigns (supplying them with a discrete system of numbering), the succession war’s outbreak, and the *turtānu*’s building activities at (Ša)dikanni. Despite lip service to his liege,⁶¹ Dayyān-Aššur had all but replicated Assyrian kingship in miniature, and the timing of the statue’s creation upon a civil war’s eruption is telling.

Resultant is a distinction between inscribed monuments emerging ‘from below’ involving local political actors and reflecting regional concerns (including land grants) or traditions, and others imposed ‘from above’ (even in the same spaces) by transregional elites which aped royal functions. This is manifest in comparison of the early 8th century’s two most powerful Assyrian officials.

From the early 800’s to the late 760’s, Igištu-ēreš⁶² governed the province of Rašappa, situated athwart the Middle Euphrates’ lucrative trade routes (Edmonds, 2025c: 243–246).⁶³ The immense wealth accumulated through his office is evident from Igištu-ēreš staggering sacrifice at Aššur on the advent of his second eponymate (775), as recorded on a very poorly composed inscription from a votive mace-head (Ass 10274, edition after Niederreiter, 2009):

⁵⁹ Intimations exist that Salmānu-ašarēd III*’s accession in 859 was irregular (Edmonds, 2025c: 129–130), and the absence of any continuity in high officials suggests that he brought with him a cadre of new men. Dayyān-Aššur replaced Salmānu-ašarēd III*’s competent first *turtānu* Aššur-bēlu-ka⁷⁰ in 855 but never enjoyed his predecessor’s success—his retention of his role through the many subsequent years of bloody, indecisive western campaigning suggests more political savvy than martial nous.

⁶⁰ RIMA 3, 0.102.14: 141–190; 16: 228’–341’ (incorrectly cited in Edmonds, 2025c: 134).

⁶¹ i.e. “[Salmā]nu-ašarēd III king of Assyria, the strong king, my lord” [mdSILIM(?)]-(ma²)-nu²-MAŠ² MAN² KUR²-aš-šur MAN dan²-nu EN-ia KUR aš-šur (Frahm, 2015: 79).

⁶² The divinity ^dIGI.DU, who must be distinguished from Nergal, has hitherto been rendered *Pālil*. MacGinnis (2025), has correctly challenged this assertion, suggesting rather that this reflects a divinity rendered *igi-še₃ du* in Sumerian, the precise normalisation of whose name in Assyrian Akkadian presently remains unresolved, but is perhaps *Igištu*.

⁶³ This province’s precise localisation remains disputed; see Edmonds, 2025: 243.

ana ^dU.ʽGUR¹ EN ʽMAH a¹-šib ^{uru}BAL.TIL EN GAL-e EN-šu
^{md}IGI.DU-KAM ^{lú}šá-kìn ^{kur}ru-ša-ʽpi⁷ ^{kur}la-qe-e ^{kur}su-ḫi ina ʽ2¹-e lim-
me-a ʽ5(+1)¹ ME 50 ʽGUD^{meš} 6 LIM UDU^{meš} 3 LIM ʽZÍD.DA^{meš} 1
LIM 4 ME GEŠTIN^{meš} ʽa¹-na ^daš+ʽšur¹ ^dʽIŠKUR¹ UDU.SISKUR^{meš}
KÙ^{meš} lu DÙ <<KÚR¹>> ana ʽTI¹-a ʽak¹-ru-ʽma¹ BA

To Nergal, august lord who dwells in Baltil, the great lord, his(!) lord,
Igištu-ēreš governor of Rašappa, Laqê, and Sūḫu—in my second
eponymate, verily I made Aššur and Adad sacred offerings of 650
oxen, 6,000 sheep, 3,000 (measures of) grain and 1,400 (measures of)
wine <<END QUOTATION¹>>—I consecrated and offered (this
mace-head) for my life.

As the sentence describing the copious offering is clumsily excerpted from
another text,⁶⁴ other inscriptions of Igištu-ēreš (perhaps monumental)
commemorating his second eponymate’s festivities had presumably been
commissioned. Affluence attracts high office, but Igištu-ēreš never occupied a
‘cabinet-level’ post in Assyria; rather, he stayed ‘local’ in his infrastructural and
cultic accomplishments (Kühne, 2017)—given his unusual theonym, he was
presumably native to the region, wherein his power must also have lain (Edmonds,
2024c: 147, 245).⁶⁵ Indeed, he expanded his domain outwards to encompass
neighbouring provinces (Nēmed-Ištar) and even vassal states (Ḫindānu, Sūḫu), as
if ruler of a kingdom within a kingdom.⁶⁶ He accomplished this ‘inside the
system’ both through royal land grants (RIMA 3, 0.104.9),⁶⁷ and institutional
skulduggery; summoned to Assyria at some juncture between the summer of 797
and 796, Tabnēa, the ruler of the Medioeuphratine client state of Sūḫu, was
murdered, and the important Sūḫian island city of Anat peacefully transferred to
Igištu-ēreš (Edmonds, 2024c: 77–78). This, then, was power exerted ‘from below’
by a likely local actor, and the inscriptional find reflects this.

⁶⁴ The present author follows Niederreiter (2009: 95–96) in understanding the KÚR as
scribal notation signifying an excerpt’s end, meaning that an original inscription *ana*
Nergal bēli šīri āšib Baltil bēli rabē bēlišu Igištu-ēreš šakin (māt) Rušapi, (māt) Laqê (māt)
Sūḫi ana balāṭīya akrumma aqīs (note the commonplace confusion between third and first
person) was clumsily split open to accommodate the sentence on the second *limmu*-
celebrations, which, however, was not reworked into a subordinate clause. The ineptness
of the scribe (who even permitted the notation to be carved on the mace-head) is striking;
comparable is the ‘clanger’ of a copying mistake of line 7’ of Igištu-ēreš’ inscription on
the side of Adad-nārārī III’s Dūr-Katlimmu Stele (Radner, 2012: 272–273).

⁶⁵ Note Igištu-names’ coeval frequency among Assyrian officials (Edmonds, 2025c: 147).

⁶⁶ He even secured the distant Assyrian outpost of Aššur-ašbat (Tall ʽAwšarīya, Syria) just
downstream of Til-Barsip to control better Euphratine trade (Edmonds, 2025c: 147).

⁶⁷ A well-preserved duplicate of this text from the temple of Ninurta at Kalḫu is currently
being edited by John MacGinnis and Michael Danti (MacGinnis, 2025: 78, fn. 4).

There is a noticeable progression in the format of Igištu-ēreš’ surviving monumental inscriptions. The earliest of these was added to the side of a stele of Adad-nārārī III deposited in the temple of Salmānu at Dūr-Katlimmu around 802.⁶⁸ The stele’s main inscription recounts that the king had resolved to renovate this god’s residence in a “fit of inspiration” (*ina ḥissat libbīya*) on his return from a campaign to the Ġabal Lubnān (RIMA 3, 0.104.5: 12–20); thus, through soft, local power, Igištu-ēreš had convinced the young, homeward bound monarch to divest himself of his precious haul of cedar. At some point thereafter, Igištu-ēreš presented a golden sword and royal statue to the same god, and commemorated this on the stele’s flank; while poorly inscribed and replete with an embarrassing typo (Adad-nārārī III is confused with Salmānu), Radner (2012: 271–272) judges its language highfalutin. Subsequent monumental stelae from Tall ar-Rimāḥ (RIMA 3, 0.104.7) and Saba’a (RIMA 3, 0.104.6), both in Syria, combine texts of Adad-nārārī III and Igištu-ēreš into continuous inscriptions. At Rimāḥ, Igištu-ēreš’ section lists the cities which Adad-nārārī III tasked him with reconstructing (RIMA 3, 0.104.7: 13–20), while the governor’s portion of the Saba’a Stele’s inscription (RIMA 3, 0.104.6: 23–25) merely provides his extended titulary. In each case, Igištu-ēreš ‘piggybacks’ on a royal inscription to immortalise himself, and the innocuous contents of his own textual passages—land grants and dedications on the sovereign’s behest—smack of false modesty. They are written ‘from below’ hiding behind custom, and considering their fine Akkadian but shoddiness of realisation, must not have been treated with much seriousness. Nonetheless, many of them would subsequently be defaced, most likely during the Tukultī-apil-Ešarra III*-rebellion of 763–758 (Edmonds, 2025c: 246).

Consider contrastingly the inscriptions of Šamšī-ilu, *turtānu* for some 40 years, and likely a castrated son of Šamšī-Adad V (perhaps by a Levantine or Syrian mother).⁶⁹ Their ostensibly respectful contents (Zaia, 2018: 209–213) are belied by cavalier disdain. Already on his earliest monument, a border marker (*taḥūmu*) discovered at Tavla, Turkey (the ‘Antakya Stele’, RIMA 3, 0.104.2), the king’s regality is besmirched. Depicted thereupon are two figures on either side of a standard of Sīn of Ḫarrānu, the right-hand of which is a eunuch (thus Šamšī-ilu), meaning that the bearded, albeit broken figure on the left must logically be Adad-nārārī III, despite his wearing of courtly rather than royal dress (Edmonds, 2025c: 149–150)! In turn, the (wobbly) initial three lines containing Adad-nārārī III’s titulary (RIMA 3, 0.104.2: 1–3) seem to have been added secondarily as they ‘float’ above the inscription proper, which begins underneath the figures with line 4’s *taḥūmu ša (...)*.⁷⁰ Here, the aging Adad-nārārī III was but an afterthought.

⁶⁸ Edition: Radner, 2012; dating: Edmonds, 2025c: 295–296.

⁶⁹ For Šamšī-ilu’s background, see Fuchs, 2008a: 97–98; Edmonds, 2025c: 148–149.

⁷⁰ This is analogous to RIMA 3, 0.104.3: 1 (the so-called Pazarcık Stele) from earlier in his own reign or the later İncirli Stele’s line 1: *hgbl z (...)* beneath the sculpted niche.

His son and successor Salmānu-ašarēd IV fared even worse; the king’s only mention is together with Šamšī-ilu on the reverse of the stele found at Kızılkapanlı (the so-called Pazarcık Stele RIMA 3, 0.106.1), and the variation between first and third person hardly bespeaks royal agency. Šamšī-ilu’s remaining inscriptions omit him, although an example from 773 does discuss Šamšī-ilu’s construction of a new settlement near Aššur called *Ana-šarri-iddina* ‘he gave it to the king’ (RIMA 3, 0.104.2012)—as Assyrian kings do not receive cities, but rather found them, this is a superlative snub from the *turtānu* (Edmonds, 2025c: 152).⁷¹ The framing is clearly ‘from above’, which accords with the florid, erudite Akkadian of both these and the field marshal’s other contemporary inscriptions (RIMA 3, 0.104.2010; 2011).⁷² Exemplary are a brace of monumental lions from Tall ʿAḥmar bearing Šamšī-ilu’s inscriptions;⁷³ these were local, Syro-Anatolian sculptures (Aro, 2023: 48–50) repurposed around 774 and engraved with an exceptional account. This passage is characteristic (RIMA 3, 0.104.2010: 13–16):

*i-na [qī]-bit AD ʿaš-šur¹ EN GAL u LAL-ʿtú¹ AMA é-šar-ra^{mdr} šam-ši¹-
DINGIR^{rlú} tar-ta-nu NIMGIR GAL-ú¹ [ša-tam] ʿÉ.KUR^{meš} GAL ERIM^{1bi.a}
DAGAL ina qé-reb KUR-e šu-a-tú ʿre-de-e ug¹-da-ʿáš¹-šir ina šá-ga-me
GAL^{meš} NÍG.NAR^{meš}-ma^{giš} TUKUL^{meš} šu-tak-šu-ru-te šá par-d[i]-iš i-ra-mu-
m[u] ʿi¹-zi-ʿqa¹ im-ḥul-iš šam-ru-te mu-re-e ʿLAL¹-at^{ʿgiš} ni-ri-šú UGU-šú an-
za-ni-iš uš-pa-riš-ma [i]š-ku-na [a-bi-ik-ta]-šu e-zib-ma um-ma-na-te-šú
UKKIN-šú BIR^{meš} MĒ e-dúr-ma šar-ra-qi-iš ú-ši*

At the [com]mand of father Aššur, the great lord, and the lofty mother of Ešarra, foremost of the gods, Mulissu, Šamšī-ilu, the field marshal, great herald, [administrator] of temples, and head of the great host, disposed soldiers in those mountains. In great drums’ roar and weapon’s keen which fearful resounded, he stormily gusted. Fearsome colts teamed at his yoke he let Anzu-wise fly at him (scil. Argišti). He inflicted his [defeat]. He (scil. Argišti) escaped his army’s strewn mass, feared the fray, and thievishly stole hence.

Šamšī-ilu’s narrative of his defeat of the Urtian king Argišti I, who “had not extended his hand to any former king” (*ana mamma šarri maḥrê lā itrušu qāssu*), is bombastically royal; his titulary is like in ambit (RIMA 3, 0.104.2010: 8–11):

Admittedly, the inscription on the reverse of the Pazarcık Stele commissioned by Salmānu-ašarēd IV and Šamšī-ilu also opens with a titulary, so the Antakya Stele may represent a transitional format, which would pose interesting questions as to this genre’s origins.

⁷¹ Fales (2012: 135, fn. 88) contests the ascription of this inscription to Šamšī-ilu “or any non-royal personality” despite the appearance of the *turtānu*’s conventional title *rab ummāni rapašti*, the city’s name, and the unique (and thus likely non-royal) passage discussing commemoration (RIMA 3, 0.104.2012: 9’–12’).

⁷² Compare Frahm’s (2022: 68–69) recent discussion of this rich language.

⁷³ One of these may even have broken and been replaced (Aro, 2023: 50–52).

md[ša^m-šī]-¹DINGIR lú¹tar¹-ta-nu ¹NIMGIR GAL-ú¹ [ša-tam É.KUR]^{meš¹}
 GAL ERIM^{hi.a} ¹DAGAL¹ šá¹-pi-ir kur¹ḫat-ti kur¹gu-te⁹-e u gi-mí-ir kur¹ZÁLAG¹
 [ka]-šid tam-tim GAL-tú šá¹ SILIM dUTU-ši mu-šaḫ-ri-bu x [...] mu-šam-qit
 kur¹mu-us-ki u kur¹ú-ra-ar-tu šá¹-li-lu UN^{meš¹}-šú sa-pin kur¹ú-tu-²u kur¹[ru]-pu-²u
 kur¹ḫa-¹ṭa¹-lu kur¹lab-du-du šá¹-ki-nu ka-mar-šú-nu

[Šamšī]-ilu, the field marshal, great herald, [administrator of tem]ples, and head of the great host, commander of Ḫatti, Gutium, and all Namri, conqueror of the great western sea, devastator of [...], overthrower Mušku and Urartu, pillager of its people, desolator of Utu²u, Rupu²u, Ḫaṭallu, and Labdūdu inflicter of their defeat.

This grand serring of epithets is presently quite unique for a high official's inscription,⁷⁴ and bespeaks once again Šamšī-ilu's singularity within the Assyrian hierarchy. Tellingly, he is styled *šāpiru* of his marcher lands (RIMA 3, 0.104.2010: 9), an uncommon designation applicable to king and general alike, obviating any subordination. At least in Ḫatti, he can be assumed to be the creator of the Assyrian rock reliefs at Karabur and Eḡil (Edmonds, 2025c: 277), and—unlike the earlier, aforementioned stele from Tavla (RIMA 3, 0.104.2)—no pretence at the king's visual inclusion was made. That such activities occurred in the west does not undermine their Assyrian character; rather than co-opt local power constellations, Šamšī-ilu appointed his own people 'from above' (i.e. from the Assyrian hierarchy) to govern his fiefs. In the inscriptions of Ninurta-bēlu-ušur, carved on the backs of portal lions discovered at ʿArslān Ṭāš, Syria (ancient Ḫadattu), Šamšī-ilu rather than the king is mentioned as overlord.⁷⁵ While the inscriptions' use of Akkadian, Aramaic, and Luwian suggest the commissioner possessing a local, western background (Röllig, 2009: 277), their contents instead thematise his origins in the Assyrian heartland.⁷⁶

Scrutiny of the political and inscriptional landscape of late 9th and early 8th century Assyria has thus evinced a vital dualism: Local potentates 'wrote from below', creating commemorative inscriptions relying on autochthonous tradition or functions such as land grants to avoid infringement of royal prerogative; powerful elites within the overarching Assyrian hierarchy contrastingly assumed royal airs, writing 'from above' as surrogate monarchs.

⁷⁴ Zaia (2018: 211) falsely claims that the earlier *turtānu* Bēlu-lū-balaṭ also bore this title.

⁷⁵ This is stated in Ninurta-bēlu-ušur's unpublished trilingual (Galter, 2004b: 449–450).

⁷⁶ Röllig 2009, B.2–4; A.4–5; a.4'–6'; b.3–5: mdMAŠ-EN-PAP šá¹ uru¹ši-ra-ni šá¹ uru¹ḫa-laḫ-ḫi šá¹ pa-an uru¹li-pa-pa-an KUR-e URU É AD-a / ʾnrtbl¹šr z¹y qryt šrn zy ḫlḫ zy qdm llbn¹ qryt byt ʾby "Ninurta-bēlu-ušur of the town of Širāni of (Akk. adds: the city of) Ḫalaḫḫu which is opposite the town of Lipapan (Akk. adds: the mountain), my ancestral town" For the localisation of these toponyms, see Edmonds, 2025c: 286; forthcoming.

Consider thusly what might be reconstructed of the early career of the man who would become Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*. His own inscriptions merely describe him as (*ša*) *irbū ana šarrūti/bēlūt mātāti* (...) “(one who) grew up for kingship/lordship of the lands (...)”,⁷⁷ and his siring is only mentioned on a clutch of inscribed mudbricks (RINAP 1, TP 58) from the temenos of the god Aššur at the eponymous Assyrian religious capital.⁷⁸ As a very junior son of Adad-nārārī III who was preceded by three (half?-)brothers (see Fig. 1), he must have been born near the end of his father’s reign.⁷⁹ His byname Pūlu (unattested in his own inscriptions) lacks a viable Semitic etymology, and must be a birthname.⁸⁰ This minor member of the royal household would have come of age in a tumultuous era, enduring a brutal plague in 765, the five-year uprising against his (half?-)brother Aššur-dān III in 763 instigated by their uncle Tukultī-apil-Ešarra III*,⁸¹ and yet another round of epidemic coinciding with its end. Surviving in this merciless world would have taught him *sang froid*, and the long subsequent years as a working royal—seemingly in the west—would have lent him the military and administrative acumen which would serve him as king.⁸²

⁷⁷ *ša a-na be-lut* ¹KUR.KUR¹ [(...) AN/TI² AL/ŠID² x *ir-bu-ú a-na* LUGAL-ú-ti (RINAP 1, TP 1: 2–3). The *irbū* could relate to the previous or succeeding clause, but the gist is apparent. This expression is presently unparalleled within the corpus of Assyrian royal inscriptions (Bock, 2012: 129–130).

⁷⁸ While this has been taken as evidence that his was a usurper exterior to the royal family (Grayson, 1999: 269), his son Šarru-ukīn also barely mentioned his father (Thomas, 1993).

⁷⁹ Given Adad-nārārī III’s apparent illness at the end of his reign (Edmonds, 2025c: 158–162), the child who would become Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* was probably born by 788 at the latest, leaving him a plausible 43 come his accession, and 61 at the time of his death.

⁸⁰ Various individuals with this name are attested in Assyria (Vanderroost, 2002), and its etymology is conventionally given as Akkadian *pīlu* (for which *pūlu* would be a variant) denoting a limestone block; an alternate origin in *pwl* ‘broad bean’ (i.e. *Vicia faba*) as attested in Aramaic, Hebrew, Arabic (i.e. *fūl*), and Akkadian ⁴*pu-lu* (Zadok 1998) also seems plausible. Yet, while this accords well with the Hebrew writing of the name as *pwl*, the Phoenician spelling *p⁷l* contradicts such an etymology. Schmitz’s (2022: 123–124) derivation from an unattested Phoenician root **p⁷l* analogous to Arabic *fu⁷ul* ‘good omens’ is scuppered by the lack of cognates in neighbouring West Semitic languages. More likely is a non-Semitic etymology, as intimated by a range of colourful realisations in later sources (e.g. Πώρος, Φάλνχ, Φύλος, Πύας, *Phoiulus*; see Edmonds, 2025b: 144, tab. 1). Insofar, Na’aman’s (2019) suggestion of an origin in the Gurgumite dynastic name *Laramas* (=Palalam, *Bīt-Pa⁷alli*) intrigues. Through diplomatic marriage, Adad-nārārī III could have added a Gurgumite princess to his harem late in his reign, who bore this very junior prince and named him herself (Adad-nārārī III could already have been distracted by his illness or simply disinterested). A half-Anatolian background could explain Pūlu’s later political and diplomatic successes in the west (see §2).

⁸¹ Frahm, 2023: 449; 2026a; Edmonds, 2025b: 154–156; Edmonds / Frahm, 2026: 31–36.

⁸² Consider the competence with which he annexed the west once king (§2). Uriaikki’s use of the king’s birth-name Pūlu (*p⁷l*) where Bar-Rākkib does not suggests the former’s

Aššur-nārārī V's death in 747 must have been untimely, as his successor Salmānu-ašarēd V*—Pūlu's nephew and presumably only a young adult—was likely ill-prepared for kingship (Edmonds, 2025c: 156–157). Certainly, the ensuing chaos featured the Sūhian ruler Šamaš-rēša-ušur's regaining of the island-city of Anat from Assyria, and the Aramean Ḫaṭallu confederation's ravaging of Middle Euphrates (Edmonds, 2024c: 79–80; 2025c: 246–247).⁸³ Šamšī-ilu had retained his station and influence once more, but discontent must have coalesced. By 746, perhaps towards the middle of the year, a rebellion erupted in Kalḫu, instigated by its governor Bēl-dān and probably fronted from the very first by Pūlu.⁸⁴ It might thus be assumed that this once-minor prince had risen to considerable standing over the previous decades; tellingly, his throne-name would be the same as his ill-fated uncle who had rebelled in 763: *Tukultī-apil-Ešarra*.

While the precise events of this rebellion remain unclear, Kalḫu's institutional importance in this era suggests that he had much of the elite on his side. Nonetheless, he was unable to occupy Aššur by the new year's festivities of 745, the logical juncture for the enthronement of a king who had come to power in the last months of the previous year.⁸⁵ Salmānu-ašarēd V* and Šamšī-ilu were still holed up inside Assyria's traditional coronation site; it was only come 13th Ayyāru (II) that he assumed the purple, probably after parleying with the city's governor, one Adad-bēlu-ka'in (ep. 748), who retained his post in Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s new regime as Assyria's eponym for 738. The new king was a dealmaker.

acquaintance with Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* prior to enthronement, presumably through the Assyrian prince's duties, thus presumably in the west. Note also the striking affinity with Ḫarrānu and its famed moon god displayed by the 'Sargonids' from his sons Šarru-ukīn and Sīn-aḫa-ušur onwards (see Edmonds, 2025: 288 with earlier literature), suggesting their ancestral ties with the region. Yet, no such connection is evident for Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* or Salmānu-ašarēd VI*—called the "Baltil" dynasty by Babylonian King List B in contradistinction to that of "Habigal" from Šarru-ukīn onwards—and thus it might be hypothesised that the younger sons' Ḫarrānu-affiliation was maternal, resulting from Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s marriage of a second, Ḫarrānian wife while serving there (the first—Salmānu-ašarēd VI*'s mother—could have died in 765's plague).

⁸³ Note the king's marginalisation in Bēl-Ḫarrān-bēlu-ušur's inscription (discussed below).

⁸⁴ In contrast to later chronographic sources (e.g. AKL § 75, C iv 24–25), Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s own inscriptions allot him 19 regnal years (*palū*), counting his first from the year of his accession (745) rather than the customary, succeeding (i.e. first full) regnal year (744). Previously interpreted as indicating an interregnum (Fuchs, 2008: 139), overlap with the short-lived king Salmānu-ašarēd V* neatly explains this discrepancy (Edmonds, 2025: 160–161). As Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s 'year 0' would have been the beginning of the revolt in 746 in his own scheme, it might be presumed that he participated in the insurrection from the outset, rather than being 'parachuted' into a leading role at its close.

⁸⁵ Compare the accessions of Aššur-nāšir-apli II (Edmonds, 2025c: 125) and Adad-nārārī II (Edmonds, 2024b), both too late in the year to warrant a discrete coronation.

Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s flexibility with existing potentates is also demonstrated by the stele of the palace herald (*nāgīr ēkalli*) Bēl-Ḫarrān-bēlu-ušur (RIMA 3, 0.105.2) discovered at Tall ‘Abṭa, Iraq. While created during Salmānu-ašarēd V*’s brief reign,⁸⁶ the king is not depicted, but rather the official in raffish, chequered court dress (complete with rosette) and pious pose. Its inscription tells of the palace herald’s construction of an eponymous fortified settlement (Dūr-Bēl-Ḫarrān-bēlu-ušur) in the Wādī at-Tartār, likely in response to Aramean raids (Edmonds, 2025c: 246–247), and is tellingly worded (RIMA 3, 0.105.2: 9–11):

^mEN-KASKAL-UMUN-PAB ^{lú}NIMGIR É.GAL *šá* ^mtukul-ti-A-É.ŠÁR
(written over ^{md}SILIM-*ma-nu*-MAŠ) MAN KUR *aš-šur pa-líḫ* DINGIR^{meš}
GAL^{meš} *ú-ma-’e-ru-in-ni-ma* EN^{meš} *geš-ru-ti ina qí-bit-ti-šú-nu šir-ti u an-ni-šú-nu ki-ni* URU *ina mad-ba-ri ina na-me-e aš-bat*

Bēl-Ḫarrān-bēlu-ušur, palace herald of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra (IV*) (*erased and overwritten*: Salmānu-ašarēd [V*]), king of Assyria, devotee of the great gods: With their esteemed command and firm assent, the(se) powerful lords bade me construct a city in the desert, in the wasteland.

Salmānu-ašarēd V*—whose sole, unvarnished mention relates to Bēl-Ḫarrān-bēlu-ušur’s own status,⁸⁷ and whose name has been replaced by that of his usurper—has no part in the divinely ordered commissioning of this settlement, or, indeed, the establishment of its cultic rites and tax exemption, let alone the appointment of Bēl-Ḫarrān-bēlu-ušur’s successor (Edmonds / Frahm, 2026: 43). Shortly after the monument’s completion,⁸⁸ Bēl-Ḫarrān-bēlu-ušur must have defied the curses of his own text (RIMA 3, 0.105.2: 29–30) and have replaced his former liege’s name with that of the now-triumphant Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*. Despite its non-royal figure and wanting royal deference, this updated stele’s continued existence was quite unproblematic; Bēl-Ḫarrān-bēlu-ušur retained his position under Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* as eponym for 741.⁸⁹ Royal pragmatism had saved the skin of a eunuch writing ‘from above’ his station.

⁸⁶ For its dating, see Edmonds 2025c: 158–162; Edmonds / Frahm, 2026: 31–45.

⁸⁷ The epithet *pāliḫ ilāni rabūti* evidently refers to Bēl-Ḫarrān-bēlu-ušur, who receives the subsequent mandate. Zaia (2018: 211) unconvincingly argues that the curt royal titular’s resemblance to the wording of high officials’ property remarks renders this innocuous.

⁸⁸ A *terminus ante quem* is presented by Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s first campaign in Tašritu (VII) 745, when the king would have marched by Dūr-Bēl-Ḫarrān-bēlu-ušur (see §2).

⁸⁹ Bēl-Ḫarrān-bēlu-ušur, governor of Gūzāna and eponym for 727, is hardly the same individual (*pace* Grayson, 1993: 28; Jones, 2021: 240), as demotion from a ‘cabinet’ position is otherwise unknown, and the name is common (Radner, 1999). Moreover, ND 2443+’s Bēl-Ḫarrān-bēlu-ušur transporting various Israelite (?) deportees need not be the palace herald (*pace* Galil, 2009), particularly as collation renders ^{unu(1?)}*dī-mit* a more likely reading than the Median Sagbat (Zadok, 2015: 164) necessary for this argument.

Others were not spared. The fate of Salmānu-ašarēd V* and Šamšī-ilu come Aššur's fall to Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* can readily be guessed, and both suffered a ruthless *damnatio memoriae* (Edmonds, 2025c: 163). This is noteworthy considering the emphasis in the non-royal monumental inscriptions herein discussed upon the preservation of the official's own name.⁹⁰ This explains why many of their monuments continued to stand, albeit *sans* commissioner's image or name; these objects had now been sublimated into empire's broader message.

In turn, while the client state of Sūḫu's irredentist opportunism must initially have been tolerated,⁹¹ its ambitious monumentalisation projects (Edmonds, 2024c: 79–80) and the royal airs assumed by its 'governor' Ninurta-kudurrī-ušur will have rankled with the new Assyrian regime (RIMB 2, S. 0.1002.2 i 1–7):

ana-ku ^{md}MAŠ-NÍG.DU-PAP ^{lú}GAR ^{kur}su-ḫi u ^{kur}ma-ri DUMU ^{md}UTU-SAG-PAP MIN DUMU ^mBA-šá-^dAMAR.UTU MIN ŠÀ.BAL ^{md}IŠKUR-SUM-
NUMUN MIN NUMUN *da-ru-ú li-pu ru-qu šá* ^mtu-na-mis-saḫ DUMU ^mḫa-
am-mu-ra-pu LUGAL TIN.TIR^{ki} *am-ri šá* ^dUTU u ^dAMAR.UTU ^dIŠKUR u
^dA-IŠKUR *ḫa-diš nam-riš ina kal pa-ni-šú-nu nam-ru-ti ip-pal-su-in-ni-ma e-
mu-qu gaš-ra-a-tu₄ da-na-nu ù* LUGAL-ú-tu *šá* ^{kur}su-ḫi *id-di-nu-nim-ma ù kit-
ti a-na* NAM-ia *iš-ru-ku*

I am Ninurta-kudurrī-ušur, governor of Sūḫu and Māri, son of Šamaš-rēša-ušur (ditto), son of Iqīša-Marduk (ditto), descendant of Adad-nādin-zēri (ditto), venerable scion, distant offspring of Tunamissaḫ, son of Ḫammu-rāpi, king of Bābili, the chosen one, upon whom Šamaš and Marduk, Adad and Apladad joyously and radiantly gazed with all their resplendent countenances and granted towering fortitude, strength and kingship over the land of Sūḫu, and graced his fate with justice.

Composed around 739,⁹² this is both the latest surviving inscription from this polity, and the only to thematise overtly kingship of Sūḫu (Edmonds, 2025c: 252). Ominously, it concludes with a proud account of Ninurta-kudurrī-ušur's plunder of an opulent Sabaean caravan headed towards the Upper Ḫābūr (RIMB 2, S. 0.1002.2 iv 26'–38'). Assyrian reprisals would swiftly have ensued, ending such liberality; Sūḫu would ultimately be completely integrated into the provincial system around the end of the 8th century (Edmonds, 2024c: 80).

⁹⁰ Note, for example, this passage from a stone tablet of Šamšī-ilu (RIMA 3, 0.104.2012: 9'–14'): ^{na⁴}na-ra-a-a *al-ṭu-ur ù* MU *a-na da-riš al-^lta^l-kan* EGIR-ú ^{na⁴}NA.RÚ.A-a *an-na-a IGI.LÁ-^lš^u^l šu-mi li-²i-du-^lma^l* [...] "I had this stele inscribed and thus established my name eternally. May a future person see this stele, heed my name, and [...]"

⁹¹ To Assyria's benefit, Sūḫu's new ruler Ninurta-kudurrī-ušur had vanquished Aramean marauders in early 745 (Edmonds, 2025c: 252), which may well have fostered good will.

⁹² For this inscription's dating, see Edmonds, 2024c: 79–80; 2025c: 247, 252.

These findings are interesting considering the aforementioned dearth of inscriptions commissioned by high officials during Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s reign,⁹³ and particularly the absence of officials’ eponym stelae subsequent to that of Adad-bēlu-ka⁹⁴in, governor of Aššur (Frahm, 2017: 177; 2023: 128). Certainly, the extant archaeological record’s idiosyncrasies may be partly to blame; this includes not only the unresolved dating of various pieces,⁹⁴ but also the issue as to whether the stelae of the *Stelenreihen* at Aššur are in a primary (Reade, 2004) or secondary (Miglus, 1984) context.⁹⁵ Nonetheless, there is a noteworthy shift in the depiction of high officials within royal inscriptions during this era; magnates’ names are almost never given, only their titles, and/or the generic designation *šūt rēšīya* “a eunuch of mine”. At Ḫadattu, Nergal-ilā’i, the official charged with its renovation,⁹⁶ is curtly named (RINAP 1, TP 53: 18), but the inscription’s perspective is the king’s. The same idiom is evident in a later clay foundation cylinder from Tall Baradān, Iraq, describing the completion of the city’s walls, which grandiloquently lauds Šarru-ukīn before modestly mentioning the governor Nabû-bēlu-ka⁹⁷in’s own role in the construction work (RINAP 2, 2009: 15’).

Yet, within visual sources, some officials continued to be honoured, as the rock relief at Gisgis (Köroğlu / Yumruk, 2014), which must have been commissioned by Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* (Edmonds, 2025: 228), displays not only the king, but also his *turtānu*. It is noteworthy that the neutering of the latter role through its subdivision into a *turtānu* of the left (*ša šumēli*) and of the right (*ša imitti*) only occurred during the reign of Šarru-ukīn. This same king’s reign also witnessed the removal of headbands from relief carvings of courtiers at his palace at Dūr-Šarru-ukīn (Ḫursābād, Iraq), suggesting new regulations in elite dress codes (May, 2012) of a kind not presently attested for his father’s reign.⁹⁷

⁹³ Jones (2021, 242; 2024) associates the governor of Arrapha Kīdītē’s inscribed brick (RINAP 1, TP 2006) with Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*, but—as Eckart Frahm has kindly related—his name is only attested in the Late Bronze age (Tadmor / Yamada, 2011: 169). Suggestive also is the writing of *Tukultī-apil-Ešarra* with ^{m.gis}TUKUL- (RINAP 1, TP 2006: 1. 5), which—while commonplace for earlier bearers of this name (see Baker, 2011)—is only once attested in Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s reign, on the gold bowl of Yabā (RINAP 1, TP 2004); notably, her other gold bowl also displays a deviant graphy, i.e. ^mTUKUL-A-é-šār (RINAP 1, TP 2005). That the title *šar mātāti* is first attested for Aššurnāšir-apli II (Tadmor / Yamada, 2011: 168) hardly provokes consternation, as this king’s scribes frequently cribbed from Tukultī-apil-Ešarra I’s inscriptions, and hence an inscription of the latter featuring this uncommon title could yet be unearthed.

⁹⁴ Consider Mušēzib-Šamaš’ votive stele from Anaz Höyük (Ponchia, 1991: 26–27), which the present author (Edmonds, 2025c: 157–158) places in 746 without definitive proof.

⁹⁵ Certainly, the institution of eponym dating continued unabated until Assyria’s fall.

⁹⁶ Probably governor of Našībīna, perhaps *turtānu* by the 720’s (Edmonds, 2025c: 287).

⁹⁷ The 740’s gaudy chequered textiles gradually disappeared over the following decades (Edmonds / Frahm, 2026: 41–42), but it is unclear whether this was fashion or mandate.

Thus, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s reign marks a shift to less frequent commemoration of high officials, and in inscriptions ‘from above’, framed hierarchically with much royal chauvinism. While minor inscribed monuments ‘from below’ were probably still tolerated, their motivations were innocuous (land grants, private votives, funerary reliefs). The exceptions to this rule during this late period are spectacular and from only the very highest echelons, such as Šarru-ukīn’s full, ‘bosom’ brother (*talīmu*) Sīn-aḫa-ušur (May, 2017) who enjoyed his own palace, and was able to monumentalise himself as the non-royal figure carved in the rock relief Şah 1 on the side of the modern Cudi Dağı, Turkey.⁹⁸

What, then, of Pūlu? For his first four decades, the future Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* would have experienced constant, knowing subversion of royal authority in thought, word, and deed.⁹⁹ His father long-dead, an uncle would have been his mentor—but was this the *turtānu* Šamšī-ilu, or the future rebel king Tukultī-apil-Ešarra III*? Regardless, Pūlu stood under no illusions: The 9th-century Neo-Assyrian zenith was halcyon to a young man moulded by war, pestilence, and politicking (Frahm, 2026a). Learning soldiering and statecraft alike, Pūlu began to envisage another, unencumbered Assyria, in which overbearing magnates would be replaced with deferent eunuchs, fickle vassals with orderly provinces, and division with unity (Edmonds, 2025c: 312)—in short, he imagined empire.

Its realisation demanded compromise, conceding just enough to established elites to form a powerbase,¹⁰⁰ while gradually fostering a novel imperial ethos through a ‘new guard’ of interchangeable eunuch administering newly conquered regions;¹⁰¹ above this, a superlative sovereign could effectively preside. Such was his success that the weak Assyrian king is still rejected today as fable.¹⁰² The origin and consequences of this project are the subject of the final study.

⁹⁸ Carved a rounded Šarru-ukīn-era style, the unique bareheaded figure before a lunar crescent (Nogaret, 1985) must be Sīn-aḫa-ušur; nearby are Sīn-aḫḫē-erība’s own reliefs.

⁹⁹ Cf. Zaia’s (2018: 217) thesis that “the deliberateness of non-royal self-presentation (...) could support the theory that these officials were not seeking to usurp royal power or rebel against the Assyrian king but rather that (...) they still recognized the ultimate and divinely-granted sovereignty of the Assyrian king. (...)”

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Tarhan, 2025: 141: “we must consider whether the unprecedented authority of these officials was not just a temporary solution but a transition to a new and completely necessary system established at the beginning of the late Nee-Assyrian period.”

¹⁰¹ Consider Lumsden, 2001: 34: “Although very powerful individuals and groups continued to exist, the new structure of the empire, and the expansion and broadening of the bureaucratic elite, seem to have made it more difficult for powerful men to acquire and maintain power independent of their connection to the palace.”

¹⁰² Note Antiquity’s louché, cloistered Assyrian king Ninyas son of Semiramis (i.e. Adad-nārārī III son of Sammu-rāmat), sometimes equated with one *Zamēs(ea)* (i.e. Šamšī-ilu), whose own appearance in Movsēs Xorenac’i is positive (see Edmonds, 2025c: 149).

4. Empire improvised?

Unprecedentedly concerted empire-building is already suggested by Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s first campaign as king (see §2) in late 745 (RINAP 1, TP 5: 1–5):¹⁰³

[(...) ú]-za-²i-in-šú-nu-ti-ma a-na KUR-šu-nu il-li-ku URU^{meš} šu-a-¹tu¹-[nu a-na] eš-šu-ti DÛ-uš i-na UGU DU₆ kam-ri [šá ^{uru}hu-mut i]-¹qab¹-bu-šu-ni URU DÛ-uš ul-tu uš-še-šu a-di gaba-dib-bé-e-¹šu ar-ši¹-[ip ú]-šak-lil É.GAL mu-šab LUGAL-ti-ia [i-na lib-bi ad-di] ^{uru}kar-aš+šur MU-šu ab-bi ^{giš}TUKUL aš+šur EN-ia i-na lib-bi ar-me ¹UN¹[^{meš} KUR.KUR] ¹ki¹-šit-ti ŠU¹-ia i-na lib-bi ú-še-šib [GUN ma-da-at-tu ú]-kin-šu-nu-ti it-ti UN^{meš} KUR-aš+šur am-nu-šú-nu-ti ^{id}pa-at-ti-^dEN.LÍL ša ul-tu UD^{meš} ru-qu-ú-ti na-da-at-ma [...] aḫ-re-e-ma i-na qer-bé-e-šá ú-šaḫ-bi-ba A^{meš} nu-uḫ-še

(...) I adorned them and they went to their land. I built those cities anew. On a heaped tell which is called Ḫumut. I built a city. I constructed and completed (it) from its foundations to its parapets. I founded a palace, my royal residence, in its midst. I called it Kār-Aššur. I placed the weapon of Aššur, my lord, in its midst. I settled populations of (many) lands whom I had conquered therein. I imposed upon them tax and tribute and counted them among Assyria’s population. The Patti-Enlil (Canal), which had been abandoned ere distant days [...] I excavated and let abundant water gurgle therein.

After a summary of further southern Mesopotamian territory annexed, his deportations are outlined in intricate detail (RINAP 1, TP 5: 9–12; 6: 1):

ul-tu ^{lu}a-ri-mi šu-a-tu-nu ša áš-lu-la [x (x) LIM NAM] ^{lu}tur-ta-ni 10 LIM NAM NIMGIR₂ É.GAL [x (x)] LIM NAM ^{lu}GAL-ŠAQA [x (x) LIM NAM ^{kur}]ba-ar-ḫa-zi 5 LIM ^{kur}ma-za-mu-a ú-pa-ar-ri-is ú-še-šib pa-a 1-en ú-šá-áš-kin-šu-nu-ti it-ti UN^{meš} [KUR-aš+šur am-nu-šú-nu-ti ^{giš}]ni-ri aš+šur EN-ia ki-i šá áš-šu-ri [e-mid-su-nu-ti]

From those Arameans whom I plundered, I distributed and settled [N+000 to the province] of the *turtānu*, 10,000 to the province of the *nāgir ēkalli*, [N+]000 to the province of the *rab šāqê*, [N+000 to the province of] Barḫalzi, and 5,000 to Māzamūa, and made unison, [I counted them] among [Assyria’s] population, and [imposed the] yoke of Aššur my lord such as that upon Assyrians.

So comprehensive a restructuring of conquered lands wholly departs from that of former Assyrian kings (§2); this study examines its origins and consequences.

¹⁰³ While the annals are late in date, this king’s earliest royal inscription—from Milla Mīrkī, Iraq (Kurmānġī: *Mila Mergē*)—presents the same topoi for the conquest of Ulluba in 739, and thus such processes were not *post-hoc* insertions (RINAP 1, TP 37: 43–45).

Certainly, it could be argued that Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s empire building was constituted from a “repertoire” of practices already attested from the Middle or early Neo-Assyrian period (Düring, 2020a; 2020b), and as such was unoriginal. Aššur-nāšir-apli II’s own inscriptions already vaunt his construction of palaces throughout his lands (Liverani, 2012), and his canal excavated at Nagūb would later be renovated by Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* and Aššur-aḫa-iddina.¹⁰⁴ Assyrian renaming of cities also bore a long pedigree (Pongratz-Leisten, 1997; Edmonds, 2025c: 76). Deportations were already Middle Assyrian policy (Postgate, 2013: 17–21). Only his installation of a weapon of Aššur presently wants for hallowed precedent (Holloway, 2002: 198–200; Edmonds, 2025c: 76).

To wit, evidence for any concomitant reforms of Assyria’s structure and organisation during Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s is curiously lacking.¹⁰⁵ That such transformations are mooted is so as to explain the emergence of the empire.¹⁰⁶ Yet, the traditional arguments for a wide-ranging provincial reform in the 740’s (Forrer 1920: 8–9. 49) are now all discredited (Postgate 1995: 2–4).¹⁰⁷ Slim to non-existent, in turn, is the evidence for any military reforms conducted by Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*.¹⁰⁸ Ultimately, May (2015: 108) was unable to identify any change to Assyria’s state apparatus during the reign of this ‘first emperor’.

¹⁰⁴ See Oates, 1968: 45–49; Davey, 1985; Dalley, 2001–2002: 445.

¹⁰⁵ E.g. Saggs, 1984: 85: “[t]he dramatic change in the international situation followed in large part from administrative reorganization, which gave the king direct and almost immediate control over all the resources of his empire”

¹⁰⁶ “The reforms of Tiglath-pileser (*scil.* Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*) were aimed at creating and organizing the empire, but they are not well-known, not due to their lesser importance but because of the lack of evidence.” (Elayi, 2022: 186).

¹⁰⁷ Thusly, Forrer (1920: 49) argued that the appearance of the term *bēl pīḫati* for governor parallel to the traditional designation *šaknu* marked a conceptual shift, which Postgate (1995: 2–3) dismissed, noting that the title *bēl pāḫiti* is already known from the Middle Assyrian period, further supplying a gamut of early 8th-century attestations. Similarly, a supposed abolishment of sub-provinces during Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s reign (Forrer’s so-called *Urareschaften*) suffers from a lack of attestation for such subdivisions in the first place. Finally, Postgate (1995: 3–4) was unable to identify the wide-ranging shifts in the names and dimensions of pre-existing Assyrian provinces entailed Forrer’s reform.

¹⁰⁸ Building on Dubovský’s (2004–2005) study of Assyria’s military, May (2015: 107) suggested that Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* “reformed the army’s logistics, strategy and weaponry”; however, Dubovský merely identified incremental improvements in weaponry and logistics. In turn, her claim that Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* innovatively incorporated foreign chariotry and cavalry into his army (drawing upon Dalley, 1985) is contradicted by the dragooning of foreign riders into the Assyrian army in the late 9th century (Edmonds, 2025c: 33). Moreover, the argument that the chief eunuch (*rab ša rēši*) was empowered to counterbalance the *turtānu*’s influence (May, 2015: 109; Elayi, 2022: 58–59) overlooks the campaign conducted by Šamšī-Adad’s chief eunuch Mutaqqin-Aššur in 819 (RIMA 3, 0.103.1 ii 16–34), suggesting that such military devolution was hardly newfangled. Lastly,

The innovation must rather lie in two points (see §2): Firstly, that these empire-building strategies were employed in concert (as a ‘package’; see Edmonds, 2025c: 64), and secondly that they were explicitly connected to newly annexed territory, rather than the existing Assyrian realm.

Indeed, a survey of early Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions demonstrates that there was little coordination between these practices. Expansion of Assyria’s borders did not necessitate the total provincialisation of the territory therebehind (Edmonds, 2025c: 61–65), and Salmānu-ašarēd III’s aforementioned conquest of Masuwari/Til-Barsip and its environs (§2) was not accompanied by deportations, but rather colonisation by Assyrians of the region, and the renaming of some cities (RIMA 3, 0.102.2 ii 33–35):

*i-na qí-bit aš+šur EN GAL <EN>-ia uruDU₆-bar-si-ip uru^ua-li-gu uru[nap-pi-gu]
^{ruru}ru¹-gu-^lli-tú¹ a-na URU MAN-ia aš-bat LÚ^{meš}-e lú^áš-šu-ra-a-a ina lib-bi
u-še-šib É.GAL^{meš}-te a-na šu-bat MAN-ia ina qé-reb-šú ad-di [MU] uruDU₆-
bar-si-ip uru^ukar-^dSILIM-ma-nu-MAŠ MU uru^unap-pi-gi uru^uli-ta-aš+šur MU uru^ua-
li-gi uru^uaš-bat-la-ku-nu MU uru^uru-gu-li-ti uru^uqi-bi-it-[aš+šur²] MU-šú-nu ab-bi*

By the command of Aššur, the great lord, my <lord>, I took Til-Barsip, Alligu, [Nappigu], and Rugulitu as royal cities. I settled Assyrians therein. I founded palaces as my royal residences therein. I called Til-Barsip Kār-Salmānu-ašarēd, Nappigu Līt-Aššur, Alligu Ašbat-lakūnu, Rugulitu Qibīt-[Aššur].

Indeed, this period’s deportations more often accompanied the capture of opposing armies or the punishment of vassals, than they did the conquest of territory. Most crucially, however, the destination was invariably Assyria proper, as demonstrated by the fate of Aḫūnu’s forces the following year (RIMA 3, 0.102.2 ii 74–75):

*pu-ul-ḫi me-lam-me šá aš+šur EN-ia is-ḫu-pu-šú-nu ú-ri-du-ni GÌR^{II.meš}-ia iṣ-
bu-ú-tu ^ma-ḫu-ni it-ti ERIM^{hi.a.meš}-šú ^{giš}GIGIR^{meš} pet-ḫal-lu-šú NÍG.GA
É.GAL-^li-šī-na ma-a²-du šá KÍ.LA-šu la šab-ta-at a-na IGI-ia ú-te-ra
^{id}ḪAL.ḪAL ú-še-bir a-na URU-ia aš+šur ub-la a-na UN^{meš} KUR-ia am-nu-
šu-nu*

The fear and radiance of Aššur, my lord, overwhelmed them. They descended. They grasped my feet. I appropriated Aḫūnu with his troops, chariots, riders, the rich property of their(!) palaces the weight thereof is incalculable. I made them cross the Tigris (*sic!*). I brought them to my city Aššur. I counted them among the people of my land.

Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s army was successful from his very accession, suggesting that it was already very much in fighting form (Fuchs 2008a: 106–107; Edmonds, 2025c: 47).

Compare this to Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s incredible conquest and population exchange of 738 (see §2). With much of the Levant bloodlessly vanquished and annexed through surprise intervention, the king initiated a massive deportation programme at the western and eastern extremes of his domain (tab. 3):

Table 3. The great population exchange of 738

Deportee population	Destination	Responsible official	Reference (RINAP 1, TP)
83,000 Levantines	Tušḫan (most)	King	13: 11
	Ulluba (1223)		13: 11–12
12,000 Arameans from eastern Babylonia	Ḫatti (king's presence)	King's troops	13: 12–18
[N] inhabitants of Mulūgani		Gov. of Lullumê	13: 18–20; 14: 1
[N] inhabitants of Supurgillu & [...]–aš		Gov. of Na'iri	13: 20; 14: 1–3
600 captives of Amlāte of the Damuni-tribe	Patina/Unqi	King	14: 3–5
5,400 captives of Bīt-Dērāya			
[N] Gutians of Bīt-Sangibūti			14: 5–6
1,200 Illilāya-tribesmen			
6,208 Nakkaba- & Būdāya-tribesmen	Province of Tu'immu		
588 Būdāya-tribesmen & inhabitants of Dunu			14: 6–8; 26: 5–7
[lost]			
252 Bēlāya-tribesmen			
554 Bānītāya-tribesmen			
380 Igištu-andil-māti-tribesmen			
460 Sangillu-tribesmen			
[N] Illilāya-tribesmen			
458 Gutians of Bīt-Sangibūti			
555 Gutians of Bīt-Sangibūti	Til-karme		14: 8–9; 27: 1–2

This is Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s most dramatic resettlement, but precisely the same rational governed his campaign of 745: Population movements were no longer from a neighbouring polity to Assyria's centre, but rather one edge of the realm to the other. The logic of Assyrian deportations had entirely changed.

This new, “two-way” deportation (Oded, 1979: 29–30; Sano, 2020: 344) is first attested for Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*, who used it constantly until late in his reign (Sano, 2020: 334). While its logistical demands surpassed “one-way” resettlement, its benefits were clear: In 739, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* had returned to subjugate definitively the northern Levant, annexing vassal polities on trumped-up charges, and exchanging defiant populations with new, uprooted peoples. The 83,000 Levantines were sent to two Assyrian border provinces in urgent need of bolstering. Tušḫan had suffered decades of Urartian depredation (Edmonds, 2025c: 226–228). Ulluba had been conquered the previous year, and immediately provincialised by Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* as a bulwark against Urartu (Yamada, 2018). In turn, in Babylonia and the Zagros,¹⁰⁹ the small outsider populations (nomads and hillmen) targeted by individual Assyrian governors’ military contingents would have been ideal deportees, surplus to Assyrian needs. It is nonetheless striking that Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* already employed this strategy in 745, whereby it neutralised ongoing nomadic predations, fortified Assyria’s marches, and establish an eastern Babylonian foothold.¹¹⁰

This bilateral deportation practice’s origins remain obscure, but a similar phenomenon does appear in a Luwian-Phoenician bilingual inscription of the Cilician potentate Azatiwada discovered at his new settlement at Karatepe-Aslantaş, Turkey, (KARATEPE 1). Among his achievements is listed the conquest of western lands, the populations of which were deported to his land’s eastern borders, serving effectively as “half” of an Assyrian “two-way” deportation (DeGrado, 2021–2022: 29–30).¹¹¹ Whether this is a harbinger of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s policy or an emulation thereof depends on the hotly disputed dating of this inscription.

¹⁰⁹ Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s annals have him travelling to the Lower Zāb to initiate the sub-campaigns there, before returning to Ḫatti to await deportees.

¹¹⁰ the question remains as to the provenance of the “populations of (many) lands whom I had conquered” staffing Kār-Aššur—might this be an allusion to Pūlu’s military activities prior to his accession? Certainly, all three Assyrian rulers to use the *palû* system to date their campaigns (Yamada, 2019) came to the throne irregularly (Edmonds, 2025c:).

¹¹¹ KARATEPE 1 (trans. Hawkins, 2024: 181) **Hu:** |L.274-ta-li-ha-há-wa/i “CASTRUM”-sà (PUGNUS)lu/a/i-mi-da-ia^a || (“OCCIDENS”) i-pa-mi “VERSUS”-na |NEG₂-wa/i REL-ia (L.274)ha-ta-la-i-ta |FRONS-li-zi REX-ti-zi |á-mu || REL-zi |PRAE-na |á-sá-ta |á-mu-pa-wa/i+ra/i (LITUUS)á-za-ti-wa/i+ra/i-sá (L.274)ha-ta-li-i-ha INFRA-ta-ha-wa/i-ta || | (“PES”)u-sá-ha INFRA-ta-ha-wa/i-da |(SOLIUM)i-sà-nú-há (DEUS)ORIENS-mi VERSUS-na á-mi-ia-za-ta (FINES)i+ra/i-há-za **Phoen:** w^{sn} ʔnk ʔršt ʕzt bmbʔ šmš ʔš bl ʕn kl hmlkm ʔš kn lphn wʔnk ʔztwd ʕntnm yrđm ʔnk yšbm ʔnk bqšt gbly bmsʔ šmš **English:** “And I smote strong fortresses towards the west (Phoen: strong lands in the setting of the sun), which former kings had not smitten, who were before me. (So) I, Azatiwada, smote them, and I brought (them) down, and I settled them down towards the east on my frontiers (Phoen: in the limits of my frontiers in the rising of the sun)”

Azatiwada governed on behalf of one Awarikus, king of Que, and his KARATEPE inscriptions closely resemble in wording the ÇİNEKÖY statue inscription commissioned by one Warikas, king of Que (Lanfranchi, 2007). This latter king can be neatly identified with Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s ally in the 740’s Uriaikku of Que, creator of the inscribed stele discovered at İncirli, Turkey.¹¹² Debate has centred upon whether Awarikus and Warikas are identical, or—if not—who is anterior. Until very recently, an early 7th century dating for KARATEPE has been popular on grounds the Phoenician inscription’s palaeography (*viz.* Rölliġ *apud* Çambel, 1999: 73–81); yet, this reconstruction must explain the absence of any Assyrian influence upon Karatepe-Aslantaş’ material culture (especially its reliefs), or mention of Assyria in Azatiwada’s inscriptions in a period where this would be expected.¹¹³ The solution of Azatiwada as regent of an independent early 7th-century Cilician kingdom (see Hawkins, 2024: 297–298) is historically quite unlikely.¹¹⁴ Moreover, it has been contradicted by Novák’s (2021) archaeological recontextualization of Karatepe-Aslantaş, which situates Azatiwada’s activities during the early to mid-8th century, prior to Assyria’s cultural and political dominance of the region. While this has already received some acceptance,¹¹⁵ the palaeographical impossibility of such a reconstruction has been alleged (DeGrado, 2021–2022; Santini, 2025)—this is, however, unfounded,¹¹⁶ and thus Awarikus’ reign may be placed in the 760’s,¹¹⁷ that of Warikas from the 740’s onwards, and Azatiwada’s regency in the resultant interval.¹¹⁸ This would leave Warikas and Pūlu contemporaries as young men; a cordial personal relationship while the (half-Anatolian?) Assyrian prince served on the western front (§3) would explain Warikas’ subsequent loyalty to the new king amid 743’s strife (§2), his reward in Gurgumite territory, and his use of the king’s birthname.¹¹⁹ Thus, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* may well have been inspired by Levantine deportation practices witnessed as prince.

¹¹² For this little understood monument, see Kaufman, 2007; Dodd, 2012; Na’aman, 2019; Schmitz, 2022; Carter, 2024; Gedik Zimmermann, 2025; Goedegebuure, 2025.

¹¹³ Consider the Assyrianising style of Warikas’ Çineköy-statue and his fawning over Assyria (Lanfranchi, 2007; 2009), which would need to be anterior to Karatepe.

¹¹⁴ See Fuchs’ patient historical study (*apud* Novák, 2021: 449–466).

¹¹⁵ E.g. Hawkins, 2024; Goedegebuure, 2025; Niehr, 2025.

¹¹⁶ KAI 73, Rölliġ’s key comparandum, is now dated to the early 8th century (Schmitz, 2008: 169–171). Hawkins (2024: 299) supplied a palaeographical accommodation.

¹¹⁷ From its archaic palaeography, the Hasanbeyli inscription can thus be ascribed to Awarikus, whether or not it mentions Aššur-dān III (cf. Santini, 2025: 109–113).

¹¹⁸ This corresponds to Novák’s “Solution 1” (2021: 444–446).

¹¹⁹ “the fact that in some texts from the West, Bible included (but not in the Aramaic sources of the period), he is named Pulu, probably his birth name, instead of, or together with his throne name, suggests the possibility that in the region it was known that he had achieved a very high standing before his enthroning.” (Ponchia / Lanfranchi 2024: 163).

Certainly, this strategy's centrality to Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* is evident in Bar-Rākkib of Sam'alla's description of his father Panammū II's activities in Assyrian service prior to his death at Dimašqa's siege in 731 (KAI 215: 12–14):

[wrš .] bglgl . mr'h . tgltpsr . mlk . šwr . mḥnt' . ṛw . mn' . mwq' . šmš . w'd . m'rb . [w.]mn [...] wbnt . mwq' . šmš . ybl . m'rb . wbnt . m'rb . ybl . mw[q' . š]mš

[and he ran] at the wheel of his lord, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra (IV*), king of Assyria, in campaigns both from the rising of the sun to its setting, and from [. . .] the four quarters of the earth. And the population (literally: 'daughters') of the east he brought west, and the population of the west he brought east.

Yet, that Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* so fervently pursued bilateral deportations does raise a vital question: What of the Assyrian heartland?

In the two decades preceding his accession, Assyria had undergone two brutal plagues,¹²⁰ a gruelling civil war,¹²¹ leaving its capacity for immense territorial expansion come 745 a challenge to explain (Fuchs 2008a: 106–107; Edmonds, 2025c: 47). Most recently, Frahm (2023: 131; 2026: 53–54) has embraced this very chaos, proposing that plague drove Assyria's expansion,¹²² its dreadful toll necessitating a landgrab against still-weakened enemies.¹²³ Pestilence can certainly provoke stupendous social transformation, but the issue remains as to why deportees were sent not to an ailing Assyrian heartland short of labour, but rather an opposing edge of the realm from their own.

¹²⁰ Should the present author have correctly interpreted Nimrūd Tomb 3's Coffins 1 and 3 (Edmonds, 2025c: 152–154), then these carried off various members of the Assyrian royal family, including Aššur-dān III's pregnant wife, although not all children in her coffin need have been hers (Edmonds / Frahm, 2026: 36). This heavy mortality among even the privileged can also be inferred for Sūḥu's ruling dynasty (Edmonds, 2024a: 189).

¹²¹ The destruction of Tall Mašāṭī's Phase NA1b coincides with this war (Edmonds, 2025c: 246), suggesting that it extended to the countryside.

¹²² "Taking stock of the losses of life the epidemics of the 760s and 750s had caused in the Assyrian heartland, and realizing that it was hard to boost crop production under increasingly unfavourable ecological conditions, the king decided to implement a new political strategy, one that focused on the conquest and annexation of foreign lands, the extraction of their wealth for the greater good of the Assyrian centre, and the deportation of hundreds of thousands of people from all areas of the newly expanded realm to gain the workforce needed to keep the state running." (Frahm, 2026: 53–54).

¹²³ "while clear documentary evidence is unavailable, Assyria was quite possibly not the only country implicated by the plague outbreaks of the 760s and 750s. In neighbouring lands, the illness may have taken a heavy toll as well, which would have made it easier for Tiglath-pileser to conquer so many previously independent states within such a short time span" (Frahm, 2026: 54).

The answer must be that no such manpower deficit existed within Assyria's breadbaskets. Telling in this regard is a remark in Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s annals regarding the aftermath of his 745-campaign (RINAP 1, TP 5: 12–6: 1):

¹*da-ád¹-me na-du-ú-ti ša pi-¹rik¹ [KUR]-ia ša [ina tar-ši LUGAL.MEŠ-ni AD].¹MEŠ¹-ia ar-bu-tu il-[li-ku] a-na eš-šu-te ak-šer-ma KUR aš-šur a-na [...]*

I restored the abandoned settlements of my land's frontiers which had gone to ruin in the times of the kings my ancestors.

Rather than internal agricultural intensification, the focus here is upon the expansion of cultivated land into the steppe, a typical agrarian expression of the commandment to expand Assyria, i.e. *māta ruppūšu* (Edmonds, 2025c: 68–72, 307–308). The radical demographic transformation which would undergird the Assyrian Empire was not Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s initial objective. Why, then, did “two-way” deportations cease after 735 (Sano, 2020: 334)?

The events of the king's final years furnish a solution. After finally capturing Dimašqa in 732 (§2), Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* could assail a crowning achievement: Babylonia. Yet, despite three years of campaigning culminating in his own coronation as king of Bābili in 729, his failure to kill the previous king Mukīn-zēri—who still enjoyed support even whilst confined to his city Sapīya— withheld this last laurel (Edmonds, 2025a). The king was compelled to deport ever more Chaldean tribesmen to bring the region to its knees.¹²⁴ It is in this context that Sano (2020: 334) suggests that the “two-way” deportation system broke down: unable to resettle deported Levantine populations in an unstable Babylonia, and facing a new influx of southern Mesopotamian deportees, Assyria must have experienced an enormous backlog of the displaced.¹²⁵ Only months after Mukīn-zēri was finally slain in 727 (the precondition for this “two-way” population redistribution), Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* himself died, leaving this problem to his poorly attested successor Salmānu-ašarēd VI*, who himself must have been hard-pressed to govern the dual monarchy which he had inherited (Edmonds, 2025a: 141).¹²⁶ Come Šarru-ukīn, the image changes.

¹²⁴ Note the reference to this in the Aššur Ostrakon (KAI 233: 15). A total of 125,500 deportees are mentioned in RINAP 1, TP 47 o. 15–22, rising to 155,000 by Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s latest account (RINAP 1, TP 51 12–15).

¹²⁵ Certainly, the mention in 1 Chronicles 5:26 of the resettlement of populations from the Transjordan in Hlāḥ (Ḥalāḥḥu, the modern Nawkūr, Iraq; see Edmonds, forthcoming), Ḥābôr (the modern Ḥābūr region), Ḥārā in Media, and the river of Gôzān (the environs of Gūzāna, modern Tall Ḥalaf, Syria) following Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s campaign of 732 suggests that Assyrian officials sought to evenly distribute the deportees in their charge.

¹²⁶ Albeit, Salmānu-ašarēd VI* did pursue deportations of his own (Sano, 2020: 211–213).

From 719 onwards, Šarru-ukīn resumed bilateral resettlements,¹²⁷ employing a mixed strategy of “single” and “two-way” deportation for the remainder of his reign (Sano, 2020: 428–432). Concomitant was an emphasis upon monumental building projects, which, as evident for Dūr-Šarru-ukīn (Ḥursābād, Iraq), had an integrative role (RINAP 2, 9: 92–97; 8: 49–53; 43: 72–74; 44: 49–55):

ba-²u-lat ar-ba-²i li-šá-nu a-ḫi-tu at-me-e la mit-ḫur-ti a-ši-bu-ut KUR-i ù ma-a-ti ma-la ir-te-²u-ú ZALAG₂ DINGIR^{meš} EN gim-ri ša i-na zi-kir^d aš+šur EN-ia ina me-tel ši-bir-ri-ia áš-lu-la pa-a 1-en ú-šá-áš-kin-ma ú-šar-ma-a qé-reb-šú DUMU^{meš} KUR-aš+šur^{ki} mu-du-ut i-ni ka-la-ma a-na šu-ḫu-uz ši-bit-ti pa-laḫ DINGIR ù LUGAL^{lu} ak-li^{lu} šá-pi-ri ú-ma-²e-er-šú-nu-ti

The populace of the four (quarters), foreign-tongued and diverse of speech, dwellers of peak and plain—as many as the Light of the Gods (*scil.* Šamaš), lord of all, shepherded—whom I had at the command of Aššur, my lord, I had plundered with my staff’s supremacy, these I made unison, had abide therein. I commanded born Assyrians, masters of all crafts, to instruct them in (fine) bearing and fear of god and king.

Šarru-ukīn also initiated hydraulic projects in the Assyrian countryside (such as at Fayḍa and Halāmatā; see Morandi Bonacossi / Qasim, 2022: 71–74), again with an integrative aspect.¹²⁸ The imperial landscapes created thereby were the final crystallisation of remarkable shift in Assyria’s rural settlement patterns reflected by the archaeological record. In northern Iraq, the Ġazīra, and further afield, a loose Bronze-age order had given way to regularly spaced, standardly sized agrarian settlements intentionally placed to fill vacant land (e.g. Wilkinson et al., 2005: 37–41) by this era.¹²⁹ The concertedness of these activities suggests the assertion of a new, imperial order throughout the Assyrian domain during this period, and hence it is arresting that kingship is first articulated in universalist, cosmic terms during Šarru-ukīn’s reign (Maul, 1999). The world beneath him remade, the king’s position in the universe had shifted;¹³⁰ he was now emperor.

¹²⁷ He began by exchanging Iaū-bi²dī of Ḥamat and his army for Assyrians involved with the previous regime (RINAP 2, 84: 20’; 103 ii 61–62; 105 ii’ 5–8)

¹²⁸ “One aim of this was to foment and cement the loyalty of the people living in the area. (...) A large proportion of the local farmers may have been among the deportees of war forcibly resettled in the Assyrian heartland. They very likely formed part of the workforce for the excavation of the canals and later cultivated the land thus made available for intensive irrigation agriculture. These deported communities’ lack of ethnic and cultural connections to Assyria could well have prompted the Assyrian kings to disseminate mighty admonishments of their legitimacy and power throughout the newly created waterscapes in order to ensure the loyalty of all their citizens” (Morandi Bonacossi / Qasim, 2022: 71).

¹²⁹ Through ceramics, Wilkinson et al. (2005: 40) date this process to the 8th-7th centuries.

¹³⁰ Note astral imagery’s prominence during Šarru-ukīn’s reign (e.g. Worthington, 2024).

This immense shift's cause is often ascribed to 'imperialism' (Liverani, 2017c), but such teleology wields little explicatory force (Edmonds, 2025c: 5–23; 299–312), particularly in light of the phenomena just observed. Frahm's (2026) exciting new thesis of 'Assyrian pandemic' also encounters some difficulties in accounting for the role of the Assyrian countryside in Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s expansions. The present author can articulate a novel historical scenario here.

As has been seen, Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*'s structural and demographic transformations initially only affected the edges of his realm; he sought not to remake Assyria, only newly conquered territory. Inherent to this strategy was the notion that he could successfully exchange large populations on opposite edges of his realm without negatively impacting the remainder of his realm. This may have been effective and popular for some time on a much smaller scale in the Levant, but was a gamble when applied to a state of Assyria's dimensions; nonetheless, he succeeded each time, and thus, when his 'number finally came up', and his "two-way" deportation system buckled in the face of an ungovernable Babylonia, he was unprepared for the consequences, and died before he could solve this crisis. With an ever-larger deportee population surplus to Assyria's needs occupying in its cultivable plains, a robust demographic solution was required. This was achieved through the creation of a planned imperial landscape in which these new populations could be put usefully to work in standardised agricultural settlements, expansive city-building projects, or monumental hydraulic works. Over multiple generations, this would have fostered the new, rootless peasant class, cosmopolitan bureaucracy, and universal monarch which are the hallmark of the ancient Western Asian agrarian empire (§1). The resultant imperial mode of governance was so successful that it would outlive Assyria itself as an empire. Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* set these processes in motion, but he could never have imagined their results on his fateful march to Babylonia late in 745

5. The "Assyrian threshold" and the birth of imperial governance

These three thematic studies have demonstrated that empire's story begins "gradually, then suddenly"—to quote a famous novel's line (Hemingway, 1926: 136). While the temporal framework and methodological perspectives from which Assyria's imperial transformation is investigated must necessarily influence any findings (§1), there is nonetheless sufficient evidence to articulate a more nuanced account of this phenomenon than before: The "Assyrian threshold" was a congregation of various historical processes—some novelties, others timeworn Assyrian practices, a few entirely unforeseen—around a single man, a minor Assyrian prince named Pūlu. Buffeted by history's winds in an age of plague, civil war, and stagnation, he rose to rule a kingdom, and left his sons an empire.

He fought differently from earlier kings (§2), combining a gift for soldiering with strategic virtuosity with flexible diplomacy. He could outmanoeuvre his opponents militarily and politically, and possessed both the cold-bloodedness needed to annex an unsuspecting vassal such as Tutammû of Patina, and the charisma to inspire fanatical loyalty from men such of Uriaikku of Que or Panammû II, ruler of Samʿalla—for the latter, unto death. His territorial expansions obeyed a logic foreign to his royal forebears, or even to that of his own (half-)brother Aššur-nārārī V, imposing what might be termed a ‘total conquest’—a scenario in which everything newly incorporated into the provincial system would immediately change, and was even advertised as such in advance (as in the case of Battānu). While a warring local ruler might escape death through astute submission to Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* at the eleventh hour, he would live to see new settlements, infrastructure, and populations appear about his own reduced fief—his dynasty’s days were numbered.¹³¹

Pūlu had not been born for Assyria’s kingship, but rather “grown up” (*ša irbû*) for it, and thus possessed a prudence and instinct around his own elites which his ill-fated predecessors did not (§2). He understood the running of the Assyrian state in all of its intricacies from decades of practical experience. When he seized his chance to rebel in 746, it was from a prudently selected seat of power (Kalḫu), and as *Tukultī-apil-Ešarra*, channelling his own uncle’s rebellion against the regime of the *turtānu* Šamši-ilu less than two decades before. Those who prudently switched sides such as Bēl-Ḥarrān-bēlu-ušur retained their positions of influence, but the era of the high official with a self-aggrandising cavalier personality commemorated in flamboyant monuments was past; interchangeable, sober eunuchs would become the norm. A new imperial elite was gradually forming; as vast, vanquished populations tramped across Assyria’s plains towards another edge of the realm, one might imagine a local Assyrian governor intone words not dissimilar from those of Tancredi: “Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga com’è, bisogna che tutto cambi” (Tomasi, 1958: 50).

These innovative “two-way” deportations—perhaps inspired by Levantine practices observed by him as a prince—were Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV* trump-card (§4). It must have required logistical genius to realise such immense and intricate an undertaking as the bilateral resettlements of 738, and its success bred overconfidence. As this great conqueror approached his career’s end, and divination heralded the road to Dimašqa (§2), he gambled one last time—a final “two-way” deportation between the Levant and Babylonia, and a second crown. The unexpected results were disastrous, but there is a good argument for them having engendered the universalistic imperial model which still echoes today.

¹³¹ Such a longer term process may explain the massacre of Ḥamat’s Assyrians by Iaū-bi’dī upon Salmānu-ašarēd VI*’s death (Frahm, 2013).

Thus, even if the Assyrian Empire resulted from the actions of a single man placed almost as if destined for such a purpose, it was not his coherent, choate brainchild.¹³² Each step of the march over the “Assyrian threshold” was a negotiation between geopolitical reality, daring strategic innovation, inescapable tradition, and naked ambition. This transformation (the “Assyrian threshold”) would not be concluded until the reign of Šarru-ukīn, and what has been termed the “Augustan threshold” by comparative historians of empire (e.g. Doyle, 1986: 93–97; Münkler, 2005: 105–126) may not have been reached until the reign of Sîn-aḫḫē-erība or later. It is all the more frustrating that so little is known of Salmānu-ašarēd VI*’s own incumbency.

More pressingly than ever, these findings lay bare the pitfalls of rigid, structural models of imperialism (e.g. Liverani, 2017a; 2017b), in which monarch after monarch is portrayed as mercilessly fulfilling or failing to accomplish the tasks of a static ‘imperial mission’. The exciting era of the 8th century with its crises and military reverses both before and after the imperial transformation of its midpoint offers an exciting counterpoint, and a ‘laboratory’ for experimentation with varying historical theses and models for the emergence of empire (Edmonds, 2025c: 310–312).¹³³ Closer scrutiny of this era promises identification of novel motivations for pivotal events such as the annexations, and the isolation of hitherto overlooked historical factors and mechanisms.

The result will be a better articulation and understanding of the emergence of imperial Assyria, and the modes of governance which it conferred upon its successor empires. Scarcely any other era of history provides the scholar with a riper opportunity to “look into the seeds of time / And say which grain will grow and which will not”—the outcome for broader models of empire and social complexity may yet surprise.

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¹³² As such, the present author’s recent sketch of Tukultī-apil-Ešarra IV*’s reign (Edmonds, 2025c: 162–164) must be slightly qualified.

¹³³ The use of novel tools such as (intelligent) Knowledge Graphs able to reason in time and space would permit the historian to map such scenarios with unprecedented detail.

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