

SIEGES AND SIMILES OF SIEGES IN THE ROYAL ANNALS:
THE CONQUEST OF DAMASCUS BY TIGLATH-PILESER III

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1. Introduction

Assyrian scribes frequently employ similes and metaphors when describing the attack of the Assyrian army, the attitudes of the enemy and the mighty power of the Assyrian king.¹

In the present study, the conquest of Damascus by Tiglath-Pileser III in 733-732 BC is taken into consideration. The similes and metaphors (that describe the attitude of the king of Damascus, his defeat by the Assyrian king and the destruction of the orchards by the city) refer to an Assyrian *topos* that can be recognised in other Assyrian written documents dated to Shalmaneser III and Sennacherib.

The simile of the capitulation of Rezin of Damascus seems to stand for an exact strategy used by the Assyrian army, different from the sieges usually represented on the bas-reliefs. Actually, this strategy seems to depend on the landscape features of the places, the defensive systems of the enemy city as well as on the military forces at disposal of the king's army.

According to the account of the royal inscriptions, the Assyrian army seems to be involved in other military conquests and sieges while the main centre of the region is blockaded, seemingly by a permanent group of soldiers living in a camp by the city under siege.²

1. Marcus 1977; Ponchia 1987; Milano 2005; Rivaroli –Verderame 2005.

2. See the account of both Tiglath-Pileser III and Sennacherib: while Rezin, king of Damascus, and Hezekiah, king of Jerusalem, are blockaded in their city, the Assyrian army conquers the cities of the neighbouring district depending on the main urban centre (Tadmor 1994, 78-81, Ann. 23; Luckenbill 1924, 33, ll. 27-34). On the presence of an Assyrian camp by the besieged city, see Ussishkin 1979; 2006, 352.

2. *Shalmaneser III and Tiglath-Pileser III against Damascus*

During his sixth campaign to the West, Shalmaneser III confronted a Syrian coalition at Qarqar by the Orontes river (853 BC). Despite his claim of victory, the Assyrian king was not able to defeat the alliance of Syrian cities.³

Furthermore, Shalmaneser III tried to put to an end to the kingdom of Haza'el, king of Damascus (841 BC): after crossing the Euphrates, the Assyrian king pursued Haza'el to Damascus where he was finally blockaded by the Assyrian army.⁴ However, the Syrian city confronted the Assyrian attack and Haza'el continued to be king of Damascus, also expanding the territory of his kingdom.⁵ It is interesting to note that Shalmaneser's scribes make reference to the Assyrian army imprisoning Haza'el in his city (*ēsiršū*) and cutting down the rich orchards outside⁶ – a detail found in the later account of Tiglath-Pileser III. At the same time, Shalmaneser focused on the conquest and destruction of other cities while he was coming back to Assyria: he thus gathered the tribute of important conquered centres, like Tyre and Sidon.

The continuous military action by Tiglath-Pileser III in Syria led to a total conquest and submission of territories that were turned into Assyrian provinces directly governed by Assyrian officials. Many centres paid tribute to the Assyrian king and all anti-Assyrian coalition and policy were irremediably pursued and annulled.

The conquest of Damascus by Tiglath-Pileser III (733-732 BC) is the final result of the Assyrian intervention against the anti-Assyrian coalition of Rezin of Damascus and Pekah of Israel against Ahaz of Judah. Rezin and Pekah tried to capture Jerusalem, capital city of the kingdom of Judah, but they failed (about 735-734 BC).⁷ Tiglath-Pileser III came to the aid of Ahaz of Judah, who promptly asked for the help of the Assyrian king.⁸ He finally destroyed the power of Damascus, by besieging the city, forcing king Rezin to surrender, as well as by conquering the whole region once under the control of Damascus.⁹ Rezin of Damascus died during the siege, according to the Bible (II Kings 16:9).

After the conquest by Tiglath-Pileser III, Damascus was no longer the capital of the independent and rich kingdom of Aram. Even so, it became the main centre of an Assyrian

3. Klengel 1992, 197-198; Dion 1997, 184-187; Yamada 2000, 150-163.

4. See Yamada (2000, 190-191, 207-208) for the description of Shalmaneser's military action against Haza'el: from the pitched battle at Mt. Sanir to the pursuing and finally the blockade of the enemy within his own city.

5. Klengel 1992, 199, 209-210; Fuchs 2008, 47.

6. Grayson 1996, A.0.102.8, ll. 1-27; A.0.102.10, iii 45b – iv 15a; A.0.102.12, ll. 21-30a; A.0.102.16, ll. 122'b-137'a. At least in two cases (*ibid.*, A.0.102.10, iv 1 and A.0.102.16, l. 130'), Shalmaneser also refers that he "burned his shocks": clearly the Assyrian army was acting outside the city (also in the landscape around it), probably trying to weaken the resistance of Haza'el and his people inside the besieged city.

7. Pitard 1987, 185; Na'aman 1995a, 106-110; Dion 1997, 211-215; Liverani 2003, 148, 161; Dubovský 2006b, 155-157.

8. Liverani 2003, 148.

9. Klengel 1992, 223-224.

province:¹⁰ as previously, Damascus maintained its central position in the trade routes for exchanges of goods and wares.¹¹

At the same time, Tiglath-Pileser III invaded Israel in the north conquering many centres of Galilee and Gile'ad. Pekah of Israel was killed in a palace revolt and a new king, Hosea, reigned as a loyal vassal of the Assyrian king.¹²

3. *The simile of the conquest of Damascus: the indication of a military strategy?*

Although fragmentary, the Annals of Tiglath-Pileser report the conquest of Damascus using the simile of the enemy king enclosed in his own city “like a bird in a cage”. Following the reconstruction and translation by H. Tadmor, the Assyrian text narrates:

(10') For 45 days my camp (11') I set up around his city, and I cooped him up like a bird in a cage. His gardens, (12') [...] orchards without number I cut down; I did not leave a single one.¹³

Actually, the Assyrian text does not explicitly refer to the conquest of Damascus: it is stated that Tiglath-Pileser forced Rezin to remain inside his city for 45 days; in the meantime, the Assyrian army systematically destroyed the rich orchards around the city – the famous oasis of the Gutah surrounding the Syrian city.

The Assyrian text goes on to tell that the king and his army also conquered 591 cities within 16 districts of Damascus: in contrast to descriptions of the military action against Damascus by means of metaphors and similes,¹⁴ the text is more explicit in its reference to the destroyed cities which are “like mounds of ruins after the Deluge”.¹⁵ It is impossible to say whether the conquest of the 591 cities – only four of which are mentioned in the text¹⁶ – occurred after the final capitulation of Damascus (irremediably weakened by the presence of the Assyrian army for 45 days), or during the siege of the city. In fact, it is said that the king set his camp around the city: the camp could also have been used as a temporary base of the Assyrian army's military operations in the region. If one assumes a simultaneity of the actions, while Damascus was permanently besieged by some of the Assyrian troops, the rest of the Assyrian forces operated in the region – the 16 districts –

10. Sader 1987, 266-267; Klengel 1992, 224; Dion 1997, 216.

11. See in particular the importance of Damascus and of the kingdom of Aram during the reign of Haza'el's, the king who opposed the siege of Shalmaneser III (Pitard 1987, 145-160; Lemaire 1991; Dion 1997, 199-204, 216; Lipiński 2000, 385-390; Liverani 2003, 127-130). See Klengel 1977, 167 on the role of Damascus as important trade city and Winter 1981 on the existence of a rich centre for ivory carving.

12. Na'aman 1995b, 271-275; Lipiński 2000, 407; Liverani 2003, 161.

13. Tadmor 1994, 79, Ann. 23, ll. 10'-12'.

14. Beside the simile of the military action, the scribes also employ a metaphor to describe the nature and attitude of Rezin: the king of Damascus “entered the gate of his city [like] a mongoose” (Tadmor 1994, 79, Ann. 23, l. 9'). On the use of animals in metaphors and similes in the Assyrian inscriptions, see Marcus 1977 and Milano 2005.

15. Tadmor 1994, 81, Ann. 23, l. 17'.

16. Lipiński 2000, 363-365.

conquering and destroying the cities: in this way, the king of Damascus was blockaded and isolated in his city with no possibility of escape, and no chance of calling for support and help from his allies.¹⁷

Analysing the context and terminology used by the Assyrian scribes, it seems that the simile of the king enclosed in his city like a bird in a cage stands for a kind of strategy used by the Assyrians to succeed – although it is not explicitly stated. At the same time, the simile can be seen as an indirect declaration that the city was not captured, at least according to the usual Assyrian strategy.¹⁸ In this case, the simile would hide the Assyrian impossibility of capturing the city: the enclosure of the enemy king in the city is not an Assyrian military choice, but an enforced consequence. For that reason, the cutting of all the trees of the orchards can be viewed as an uncompleted and unsuccessful siege, in particular because of the hyperbolic declaration that not a single tree has been saved.¹⁹

The accounts of Tiglath-Pileser III and Shalmaneser III are very similar.²⁰ Like Tiglath-Pileser, Shalmaneser pursued the king of Damascus, enclosing him in the city and thus cutting down the trees of the orchards and setting the shocks on fire. In both accounts there are the indications that the king of Damascus ran away to save his life; that the Assyrian king enclosed him in the city with no possibility of escape; and that the trees of the orchards of the city were cut down by the Assyrian soldiers. However, it is sure that Shalmaneser did not capture the Syrian city.²¹

The text of Tiglath-Pileser adds the metaphor that describes the cowardly nature of Rezin – he is compared to a mongoose – and the simile that emphasizes the strategy of the Assyrian king. Although it is not clearly stated, Tiglath-Pileser finally captured the city. Rezin died (according to II Kings 16:9) and the kingdom of Aram was divided into several Assyrian provinces. Furthermore, comparing the accounts of Tiglath-Pileser III, Shalmaneser III and Adad-nirari III,²² the actual capture of Damascus by Tiglath-Pileser III seems to be supported by the indication that the king set his camp around the city for 45 days. Shalmaneser and Adad-nirari III only confined the king of Damascus within the city: documents of both kings do not speak of a prolonged siege or presence of the Assyrian forces by the city, with no temporal indication.²³ All the same, Adad-nirari finally entered Damascus and received the tribute of the king Mar'i in the palace of the latter.

17. Differently, Shalmaneser III in his western campaign conquered other cities on his way back to Assyria, after he failed to conquer Damascus.

18. Gallagher 1999, 133; Faust 2008, 186; Fuchs 2008, 63.

19. Cole 1997, 34. At the same time, the cutting of trees might be considered a military strategy to weaken the enemies and force them to submit (Id.; Dubovský 2006b, 162-163; Nadali 2005, 178; Nadali – Verderame, in press; Wazana 2007, 286-287).

20. Tadmor 1994, 79.

21. Yamada 2000, 208.

22. For the inscriptions of Adad-nirari III, see Grayson 1996, A.0.104.8, ll. 15-21.

23. Millard – Tadmor 1973, 63. See also the accounts of the conquest of Til-Barsip by Shalmaneser III. In his first and second year campaigns (858 BC), the Assyrian king confined (*ēširšū*) Ahuni within the city, pulled up his harvest and cut down the orchards. In his second year campaign (857 BC), Til-Barsip fell after a prolonged siege. Only in his third year campaign (856 BC), the conquest of Til-Barsip was finally achieved. See the reconstruction by Yamada (1998; 2000, 130-133). I warmly thank Professor F. M. Fales for the reference to the example of Til-Barsip and Ahuni.

The accounts of Shalmaneser III, Adad-nirari III and Tiglath-Pileser III share a common terminology with a very similar sequence of actions. However, the documents of Shalmaneser III and Adad-nirari III simply describe the need to imprison of the enemy king in his city as a consequence of the need to prevent his escape. The sequence of actions in Tiglath-Pileser's inscriptions seems to be the result of a strategy: the simile is not merely rhetoric or a stylistic refinement of the language of the scribes.²⁴

The use of the simile to describe the military strategy of conquest is supported by the use of the verb *esēru* ("to shut, to enclose, to confine").²⁵ The same verb also appears in the inscriptions of Shalmaneser III and Adad-nirari III when military actions against Damascus are reported. After the king of Damascus took refuge in his city, the Assyrian king imprisoned (*ēsiršū*) him with no way of escape. Other Assyrian sources – the haruspical queries – describe various techniques in siege warfare that are not based on the use of machines or technical devices: they are intentional actions and attitudes that cause famine, hunger, want and thirst, and force the enemy to surrender (SAA IV 102).²⁶

In my opinion, the use of the same verbal expression is not accidental: it seems to correspond to a strategic choice depending on particular conditions and situations.²⁷ At the same time, it is interesting to note that such a strategy always occurs in a military operation against Damascus – at least only Adad-nirari III and Tiglath-Pileser III succeeded in using it. I wonder whether the choice of the kings of Damascus to take refuge inside the city corresponds to a strategic device, since they rely upon the impossibility that the Assyrian kings conquer the city by means of a siege. This seems to be the case for Mar'i and Rezin, kings of Damascus under the kingdoms of respectively Adad-nirari III and Tiglath-Pileser III, who chose to enter their city since they remembered that their predecessor, Haza'el, saved his life by running away: in fact, the imprisonment by Shalmaneser III inside Damascus did not succeed in defeating Haza'el.²⁸

As far as concerns the unsuccessful blockade of Haza'el by Shalmaneser III, the Assyrian texts also report that the Assyrian king cut down the gardens of the city: the attention paid by the Assyrian king to the cutting down of trees can be read as an indirect indication that the siege did

24. Also in this case, the simile of the enemy king enclosed "like a bird in a cage" gives a negative connotation (Milano 2005, 62). The simile, used for the first time by Tiglath-Pileser III in Assyrian context, is attested much earlier in the letters written by Rib-Addi, king of Byblos, to the Egyptian pharaoh in the Amarna period (Mayer 1995, 310; Liverani 1974, 180-184; 1998, EA 74:46-48, 78:13-16, 79:35-38, 81:34-36, 105:8-10, 116:18-20). The simile is used by the king of Byblos to describe his poor condition, besieged within his city, so as to induce the pharaoh to help him. The scribes of Tiglath-Pileser III used the same simile both to indicate the condition of the enemy king, closed in his own city, and to point out the cowardly nature of the enemy, with a depreciative judgement.

25. CAD/E, 334-335. See also the philological considerations by Mayer (1995, 310) on the different verbs referring to siege warfare.

26. Eph'al 1997, 49-53; Fuchs 2008, 52-53, 57.

27. The verb *esēru* occurs in other two cases in Tiglath-Pileser's Annals and is referred to two unsuccessful sieges (Tadmor 1994, 79). Moreover, in the siege of Šapiya (*Ibid.*, 163), the cutting of trees is also attested: thus, the occurrence of an uncompleted siege seems to be confirmed.

28. Concerning the deliberate choice of the kings of Damascus to find refuge within their city, it would be very interesting to have more information about the urban shape and the defensive wall system of Iron Age Damascus, unfortunately unknown (Dion 1997, 319-320).

not succeed or was not completed.²⁹ After the destruction of the orchards, Shalmaneser III leaves Damascus capturing other urban centres on his way back to Assyria. Actually, the same emphasis on the cutting down of trees is present in the Tiglath-Pileser III's account of the besieging of Damascus in .³⁰

4. *“Like a bird in a cage”*: the simile of the conquest in Sennacherib's inscriptions

As observed by Tadmor,³¹ the simile of the enemy king enclosed in his city like a bird in a cage has been used by the scribes of Sennacherib to narrate the defeat of Hezekiah of Jerusalem in 701 BC, during the third campaign of the Assyrian king to the West.³²

However, Sennacherib's account is more detailed and rich. It gives the simile of the “bird in the cage” a more precise military and strategic connotation. Compared to Tiglath-Pileser III's account, Sennacherib's text seems to present the events of the capture of Jerusalem in a reverse order. The simile appears at the end of a long process of military actions.

Looking at the inscription Ann. 23 of Tiglath-Pileser III as a reference to the blockade of Damascus, I suggest that the conquest of the 591 cities by Tiglath-Pileser III took place simultaneously with the siege of Damascus: actually, the former action reinforces the latter since it deprives the king of Damascus of any help, be it technical or practical support. In Sennacherib's account, the simile “like a bird in a cage”, at the end of the sequence, strengthens the isolation of King Hezekiah.

In fact, Sennacherib's text clearly states:

As to Hezekiah, the Judean, who did not submit to my yoke, I laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, fortresses and countless small villages in their vicinity (and) conquered (them) by means of building siege ramps, drawing battering-rams up close, hand-to-hand combat of infantry, mines, breaches and assault ladders. [...] Himself I enclosed in Jerusalem, his royal city, like a bird in a cage. I laid out forts against him in order to repel him from going out of the gate of his city.³³

29. Tadmor 1994, 79; Cole 1997, 34. See also fn. 27.

30. See fn. 27. See the reconstruction by Galil 2000, 514-515, who suggests that the episode in Ann. 23 (Tadmor 1994, 79-81) refers to the events in 733 BC, when Damascus was not effectively captured, but the 591 cities of the 16 districts had already been conquered. According to Galil, the final conquest of Damascus occurred in 732 BC and is narrated in the fragmentary inscription Ann. 24 (Tadmor 1994, 80-83), where the defeat of Rezin is reported. Thus, first Tiglath-Pileser III blockaded Damascus emphasizing the cutting down of trees and concentrating on the neighbouring centres (733 BC, Ann. 23); then, he captured Damascus with the final defeat and the death of Rezin (732 BC, Ann. 24; Oded 1974, 46-47; Fuchs 2008, 65). Unfortunately, the inscription Ann. 24 is too fragmentary to understand which strategy the Assyrian army used to capture and despoil Damascus, whether a real siege or a consequence of the blockade.

31. Tadmor 1994, 79. See also Mayer 1995, 310, 360; Milano 2005, 62.

32. Frahm 1997, 59 (T 4).

33. Mayer 2003, 189. See also Frahm 1997, T 16; Rivaroli – Verderame 2005.

And again:

His [Hezekiah's] towns, which I plundered, I *separated* from his territory and handed (them) over to Mitinti, king of Ashdod, Padi, king of Ekron, and Šillī-bēl, king of Gaza, and thus I reduced (the size of) his country. (emphasis mine)³⁴

Sennacherib is really much more explicit in describing his military operations in the territory of the kingdom of Judah. The text presents both ways of conquering a city:

1. a siege by means of the traditional use of machines and techniques (ramps, battering rams, breaches, mines and ladders);
2. the blockade strategy.

It is evident how both ways of conquering a city depend on each other and how the isolation of a city, and of its king, can be easier and the defeat faster if all the satellite cities are destroyed and conquered first.³⁵ At the same time, the capture of the satellite cities can make up for the impossibility of conquering the main centre.³⁶

However, Sennacherib's text adds a detail that seems to stress the military nature of the simile in those contexts: "forts" are laid out against the city gate to imprison (*ēširšū*)³⁷ Hezekiah in his own city "like a bird in a cage" and to prevent him from possible escaping and receiving supplies and help.³⁸ Sennacherib's text clarifies that the king of Jerusalem has been intentionally imprisoned and blockaded to cause his capitulation.

It is difficult to reconstruct the form and function of the "forts" or "Befestigungsanlagen": those military devices clearly had the aim to prevent the surrounded king from leaving the city – Sennacherib's text explicitly refers to the city gate.³⁹

Recently, C. Uehlinger suggested that some depictions on the bas-reliefs in Sennacherib's South-West Palace at Nineveh can be identified with those "forts" used during siege warfare.⁴⁰ Bas-reliefs depict low walls on which Assyrian soldiers are usually placed: the walls appear in foreground and the besieged cities and processions of prisoners are represented in the background, thus implying that the siege was successful (Figs. 1-2). Uehlinger's hypothesis is very reasonable, when the circumstances and contexts of the use of those siege devices are taken into consideration: except from room V, the representations of low fortified siege walls detected by Uehlinger occur in rooms where the military events of Sennacherib's western campaign are depicted.⁴¹ Such a reconstruction

34. Mayer 2003, 189.

35. Eph'al 1997, 49. See other examples in Dubovský 2006b, 163-164.

36. See fn. 17.

37. The same verb is used by the scribes of Shalmaneser III, Adad-nirari III and Tiglath-Pileser III.

38. For the term translated as "forts" (URU.ḪAL-ŠU.MEŠ), see Mayer 2003, 180. See also Frahm 1997, 59, who translates the term as "Befestigungsanlagen" and van der Kooij 1986, 97-98.

39. van der Kooij 1986, 97-98; Vogt 1986, 63-67.

40. Uehlinger 2003, 295-296.

41. *Ibid.*, 296; Russell 1991, 172.

fits with the episode of the capture of Jerusalem occurred during Sennacherib's third campaign in the Levant.

The term URU.ḪAL-ŠU.MEŠ also refers, in a more general way, to fortifications and military outposts (*birtu*), as in other Assyrian sources (e.g. Sargon's military correspondence).⁴² In Sennacherib's context, it surely refers to a military device, a kind of "Befestigungsanlagen" appropriately employed upon the military strategy.⁴³

The term was later employed by both Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal with the same meaning – a siege device to blockade the enemy and thus force him to surrender. Both Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal report they built URU.ḪAL-ŠU.MEŠ against Ba'al, king of Tyre: they thus deprived him and his people inside the city of bread, water and any kind of provisions.⁴⁴ As for Sennacherib, the construction of URU.ḪAL-ŠU.MEŠ by Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal occurs in siege warfare in the West, against a city of the Levant.

Concerning the construction of siege devices, the first attestation seems to date back to Adad-nirari II (911-891 BC). Also in this case the strategy occurs in regions west of Assyria: in fact, Adad-nirari II reports he "placed redoubts (*ālāni*)"⁴⁵ around the enemy city when he marched to the land of Ḫanigalbat; further specifying that this military technique had never been used before by any of his predecessors.⁴⁶

Similarly to the later Assyrian kings, Adad-nirari II shares both the same western geographical area where the construction of forts in military operations have been employed, and the same aim at forcing the enemy to surrender because of starvation and exhaustion.⁴⁷

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the Assyrian sources shows that the use of blockades was a common way to conquer an enemy city. Starting from the most ancient attestation (Adad-nirari II) up to the most recent (Assurbanipal), the blockade always has the same purpose: the imprisonment of the enemy in his own city to cause the final capitulation due to starvation and exhaustion. In particular, Adad-nirari II, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal specify that the blockade of the enemy city is

42. See e.g. the Sargonid letters collected in SAA I, SAA V and SAA XV; Mayer 2003, 180-181; Dubovský 2006a, 204-205.

43. See CAD H, 51-52 where the translation "siege walls" is given when the term appears in war contexts.

44. Esarhaddon (Borger 1956, § 76, 12-14); Assurbanipal (Borger 1996, 216, B § 15, II 41-49). Waschow 1938, 23, 25; Fuchs 2008, 57.

45. On the term *ālāni* in military and siege contexts, see Kooij van der 1986, 103, fn. 68, Fuchs 2008, 57 and CAD A, 387.

46. Grayson 1991, A.0.99.2, ll. 49-55; Kooij van der 1986, 102-103.

47. Grayson 1991, A.0.99.2, ll. 62-79. On the Assyrian military operations in the West, see the consideration by Fuchs 2008. The well fortified centres of Syria and the Levant often held out against the Assyrian attacks: thus, the blockade was the only military choice to capture the city. Such a technique always succeeded, at least according to the Assyrian sources. In reality, sometimes the Assyrian conquest was the result of political and economical agreements with the enemy with no real military intervention. In general, on Assyrian siege techniques, see most recently Fales, in print.

through the construction of military devices surrounding the city or, more specifically as in Sennacherib's inscriptions, by the city gate.

Besides the usual siege techniques – employment of ramps, battering rams and specialised troops to mine the enemy walls – the Assyrian sources document a second strategy, apparently not represented on the Assyrian palace bas-reliefs, by which the Assyrian army succeeds in capturing enemy cities.⁴⁸ On one hand, the construction of ramps and the use of battering rams imply a more active role and involvement of the Assyrian army, with a more effective risk also; on the other, the blockade can be described as a passive attitude of the Assyrian army since it waits for the ineluctable capitulation of the enemy city after it has been completely isolated by means of the construction of “siege walls”/“forts” around its perimeter and territory.

Coming back to the example of Damascus, it is not a mere coincidence that three Assyrian kings (Shalmaneser III, Adad-nirari III and Tiglath-Pileser III) report the same circumstances with almost the same sequence of actions: the Damascene king flees from the Assyrian king and takes refuge in his city; the Assyrian king imprison him leaving no way of escape until he finally capitulates.⁴⁹ For that reason, the simile used by Tiglath-Pileser III's scribes cannot be reduced to a mere evasive allusion to an unsuccessful capture of Damascus alone:⁵⁰ on the contrary, the simile stands for a military strategy and emphasizes the real military nature of the operation of enclosing the Damascene king “like a bird in a cage”. Due to the massive defensive walls of Damascus, it is likely that the Assyrians were forced to resort to a blockade strategy, thus avoiding a direct assault by building ramps and using battering rams.⁵¹

Notwithstanding this, Sennacherib's account of the capture of Jerusalem seems to corroborate the use of the blockade strategy to conquer a city providing a detailed description of the sequence of operations employed by the Assyrian army: the final imprisonment of Hezekiah inside Jerusalem “like a bird in a cage” is the result of a series of conquests of all neighbouring cities depending on Jerusalem. Hezekiah, blockaded in his own city by the siege devices (URU.ĦAL-ŠU.MEŠ), finally surrendered.⁵²

As concerns the visual representation on the bas-reliefs, we can compare the captures of Damascus and of Jerusalem. C. Uehlinger suggested that some representations of low siege walls on Sennacherib's bas-reliefs can be interpreted as the “forts” (URU.ĦAL-ŠU.MEŠ) used to blockade Jerusalem. However, do we have a representation of the capture of Jerusalem in the South-West Palace in Nineveh? Apparently, the episode has not been depicted in the rooms of Sennacherib's palace, but C. Uehlinger recently suggested that slab 28 in Sennacherib's throne room could depict

48. Slab 13 from Room XII in Sennacherib's South-West Palace depicts both techniques (Barnett - Bleibtreu - Turner 1998, pl. 151). At the bottom of the slab, a low wall by the river (URU.ĦAL-ŠU.MEŠ), on which Assyrian soldiers are placed, is represented. The centre of the slab depicts the assault of the Assyrian army with ramps and battering rams and a row of prisoners leaving the city.

49. Except for Hazza'el who confronted the Assyrian siege of Shalmaneser III.

50. Although the presence of the *topos* of the destruction of the orchards (see fn. 19 and 27).

51. See fn. 28.

52. In reality, Sennacherib probably came to terms with Hezekiah and Jerusalem did not suffer a proper assault by the Assyrians – at least no siege ramps have been constructed and no battering rams have been used (von Soden 1985, 151-152; Ussishkin 2006, 352-353; Faust 2008, 183-184).

the city of Jerusalem.⁵³ According to Uehlinger, the representation corresponds to the account of the Annals: the city is not under siege and the lonely man standing on the walls can be identified with Hezekiah, enclosed in his city “like a bird in a cage”.⁵⁴

What about Damascus? No representation of the city exists. Of course, the absence of the representation of Damascus under siege by the Assyrian army may depend on the poor state of preservation of Tiglath-Pileser’s bas-reliefs. Notwithstanding this, the lack of depictions of both Jerusalem and Damascus under siege might depend on the nature of the military operations conducted by the Assyrian forces. Sculpture cannot benefit from the use of similes and the capture of a city by blockade cannot be effectively and visually represented.



Fig. 1 Nineveh, Sennacherib’s South-West Palace. Room IV, slab 4 (after Russell 1998, pl. 83).

53. Uehlinger 2003, 301. The scholar follows the recent reconstruction made by J. M. Russell 1998 in numbering the slabs of Sennacherib’s South-West Palace.

54. Uehlinger 2003, 301.



Fig. 2 Nineveh, Sennacherib's South-West Palace. Room IV, slab 10 (after Russell 1998, pl. 95).

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