

F. M. Fales, "Moving around Babylon: On the Aramean and Chaldean Presence in Southern Mesopotamia."

In: E. Cancik-Kirschbaum, M. van Ess, & J. Marzahn (eds.),
Babylon: Wissenskultur in Orient und Okzident
(Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 91–112.

Moving around Babylon: On the Aramean and Chaldean Presence in Southern Mesopotamia

1. A glimpse at the human and social “landscape” of the Babylonian region in the early centuries of the 1st millennium BC, as depicted in the textual material of the age, is sufficient to suggest that the main cities of ancient tradition and fame – from Babylon itself to Borsippa to Sippar to Nippur to Isin to Uruk and Ur – would have only contributed to a limited extent to the overall population. Specifically, all around these well-established urban seats of political power or of religious authority or of learning – where a dwindling population of ancient Sumero-Akkadian stock survived – a massive, and often hovering, presence of Aramean and Chaldean tribally-based groups had been progressively gathering. These groups were in part settled in specific ecological niches of the alluvial plain between the lower reaches of the Tigris and Euphrates, and were in part (seasonally or permanently) circulating in the countryside among the named cities, with no particular scruples about going in and out from the urban precincts themselves.

This brief essay has the scope of touching upon the available evidence on these peoples of non-native origin who were, comprehensively, “moving around Babylon” between the 8th and the 7th century BC. But the notion, here propounded, of “moving around Babylon”, should not be understood as a mere historical-geographical guideline; there is decidedly more to it than meets the eye. During this crucial historical period, in effect, Babylon functioned consistently as a political target or prize of excellence, *per se* and in antagonism with the invasive actions of the Assyrians. In a nutshell, Babylon – the city of cities of Mesopotamian tradition – needed to be taken and ruled, or at other times protected and defended to the hilt, against the powerful northern Mesopotamian neighbours, if it was ever to become the political and administrative “center of the world” for the originally non-Mesopotamian peoples of the southern alluvium, as it eventually would. In this particular light, therefore, a number of varying and diverse socio-cultural protagonists, going back to Aramean or Chaldean ethnicities, may be caught in the textual record as “moving around Babylon” at the time.

The historical origins of the Arameans on the lower Tigris and Euphrates alluvium still remain quite unclear.¹ As is well known, Aramean tribal groups are most prominently

1 J. A. Brinkman, *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia, 1158–722 B.C.*, Roma 1968; Id., *Prelude to Empire. Babylonian Society and Politics, 747–626 B.C.*, Philadelphia 1984; E. Lipiński, *The Aramaeans. Their Ancient History, Culture, Religion*, Leuven 2000; F. M. Fales, *Arameans and Chaldeans: Environment and Society*, in: G. Leick (ed.), *The Babylonian World*, New York-London 2007, 288–298.

attested from the 11th century B.C. onward as new occupants of strategic areas (and perhaps of pre-existing fortified settlements) throughout the northern Mesopotamia and Syrian steppe – the so-called Jezirah – a base from which they would oppose the Assyrian military thrust towards the Euphrates fords and thence westward into the Transeuphratene and the Levant until 850 BC.

In parallel, official Babylonian texts indicate that tribal groups variously labelled as “Arameans” or “Suteans” (a traditional designation for West Semitic nomads) carried out the looting of Sippar and other cities in the northern alluvial plain at different moments of the 11th and 10th centuries. At largely the same time, even the Assyrian main cities on the upper and middle Tigris were being menaced by Aramean marauders; and – as one reconstruction goes² – the strong Assyrian armed reaction which ensued during the late 10th-early 9th century could have forced the tribal groups to migrate downstream, where they occupied land from the Tigris riverbank to the nearby Euphrates near Sippar, and especially in the vast southeastern plain between the Tigris and Elam. Certainly, some residual connections between these southern Arameans with the middle Euphrates area might act as evidence of this progressive descent downstream: as in the case of the *Haṭallu* tribe, which is mentioned in the annals of the philobabylonian rulers of Suhu around 770/760 BC, and reappears, with some of its sub-groups, in the long list³, which summarizes the names of the Aramean tribes defeated by Tiglath-pileser III (745–722 BC). There are, however, other theoretical reconstructions of this scenario, directly linking the Aramean takeover lower reaches of the Tigris to the plundering actions of the 11th century, i.e. implying that the Arameans had very early on already split between northern (Jezirah) and southern branches.⁴

It is difficult to decide on the matter, as things stand. As is well known, the characteristics and statistics of human presence in southern Mesopotamia have been the object of a number of regional or local surveys and analyses in an anthropological-archaeological perspective during the last half-century.⁵ These surveys, while unfortunately not covering in full the territory of the southernmost Tigris-Euphrates alluvium, have provided a valid and detailed picture of human occupation from a diachronic perspective for a number of specifically observed areas, ranging from the Diyala basin around present-day Baghdad to the Euphrates basin to the city and area of Kiš and finally to the Uruk hinterland. The combined data of the surveys points to an overall long-term trend for the period between the 12th and

2 E. Lipiński, *The Aramaeans. cit.*, 412 ff.

3 H. Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III, King of Assyria*, Jerusalem 1994, 158–161; E. Lipiński, *The Aramaeans. cit.*, 426–428.

4 J. A. Brinkman, *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia. cit.*, 281–283.

5 R. McC. Adams, *Land behind Baghdad*, Chicago-London, 1965; R. McC. Adams, *Heartland of Cities*, Chicago-London 1981; R. McC. Adams/H.-J. Nissen, *The Uruk Countryside*, Chicago-London 1972; McG. Gibson, *The City and Area of Kish, Coconut Grove 1972*; S. W. Cole/H. Gasche, *Levees, Floods, and the River Network of Northern Babylonia: 2000–1500 and 1000–500 BC – A preliminary report*, in: J. Renger (ed.), *Babylon: Focus mesopotamischer Geschichte*, Berlin 1999, 87–110.

the late 8th century BC in the lower Euphrates region and in that of the Diyala.⁶ It is marked by a general decline in population levels and by a diminution of urbanism, with a corresponding increase of economic and social ruralization. Another feature which characterizes this phase is that of extensive abandonments of settlements in both surveyed areas, with limited compensation in the foundation of new sites. However, it is difficult to state whether, and to what extent, this trend should be viewed in connection with the shifting away and drying up of specific watercourses – which in its turn, according to some, represented the outcome of a perceptible climatic change towards aridity⁷ – or rather due to social and political disruptions caused by internal causes.

Let us thus rest with what we actually know about the Aramean presence in southern Mesopotamia. In one of the earliest testimonials, from the time of Tukulti-Ninurta II (885 BC), the Utu’ or Itu’ tribe – which occupied the west bank of the Tigris around present-day Samarra – is shown as having mixed living quarters, perhaps in relation to seasonal transhumance, comprising “encampments” (*maškanāte*) consisting of tents as well as actual (agricultural) “villages”.⁸ A century and a half later, when the lower Tigris catchment area became the object of intense Assyrian military pressure, we can recognize nearly 40 distinct names of medium- to small-sized tribal entities in Tiglath-pileser III’s list of “unsubmissive Arameans”. These tribes would seem to have retained their basic West Semitic ethnolinguistic traditions (both in personal and group onomastics), and to have held fast to their kinship-based social structure with only minimal yield to the pressures of adjacent sedentary states.

The Arameans, in the main, also seem to have resisted the power of attraction of indigenous Babylonian culture with its prestigious network of beliefs and lore, ennobled by a great antiquity. This social and cultural “separateness” is all the more noteworthy in that many of the Aramean tribes were in close contact with the Babylonian settlements for everyday matters: thus, e.g. the vast group of the Puqudu was active for a time in the area surrounding the ages-old cultural and political center of Nippur, to the extent of frequenting the city *en masse* to participate in a festival (*isinnu*) during the month of Ululu.⁹ Other textual attestations for this tribe point, on the other hand, to a variety of non-urban settings for its predominant economic activities; some of its main grazing grounds were in the general area of Lahiru, eastwards of the Tigris between the Diyala and Der; while a number of reports place the Puqudu in the marshy areas further south, along the Babylonian-Elamite border. It is in an even more southerly location, along the lower reaches of the Tigris and

6 J. A. Brinkman, *Prelude to Empire. Babylonian Society and Politics*, *cit.*, 8–11.

7 J. Neumann/S. Parpola, *Climatic Change and the Eleventh-Tenth Century Eclipse of Assyria and Babylonia*, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 46 (1987), 161–182; W. Kirleis/M. Herles, *Climatic Changes as Reason for Assyro-Aramaean Conflicts? Pollen Evidence for Drought at the End of the 2nd Millennium BC*, *State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 16 (2007), 7–37.

8 Cf. J. N. Postgate, art. “Itu”, in: *RIA V*, 221–222.

9 S. W. Cole, *Nippur in Late Assyrian Times*, Helsinki 1996, 9–13.

of its inner branches, that we find the Puqudu in league with the Chaldean chieftain Mar-duk-apal-iddina (Merodach-baladan) II of Bit-Yakin against the Assyrians during the years 712–709 BC. In later phases, this tribe will be again associated with anti-Assyrian activities, but now operating from the southernmost sector of the alluvium, from where it sometimes reached out westward to constitute a menace for the philo-Assyrian governors of Uruk and Ur. In general, compared to the Chaldean groups, the family units of Arameans prove to have had a far great mobility, not only infiltrating themselves between one enclave and another, but even giving rise to interregional movements, between the Middle Euphrates and Lower Mesopotamia.¹⁰

A further characteristic of the Arameans lies in their on-going rejection of an ideology of unified leadership encompassing complexes wider than individual kinship-based groups. To the opposite, in fact, as the case of the geographically ubiquitous Puqudu might show, it is the kinship-based group itself that seems to have split up in various internal ramifications, albeit retaining its common tribal denomination. The social (and, when necessary, military/political) leadership of each Aramean ramification or clan unit went back to a specific *nasiku*, “sheikh”, as indicated by written records from the reign of Sargon II onward. In point of fact, it has been noted that *nasikus* are attested in these documents in connection with a multiplicity of institutional or even purely geographical entities: i.e. not only tribes, but also lands, cities, even rivers.¹¹ This very feature might indicate a certain degree of segmentation and renewed identification as being in progress within the tribal units themselves. In particular, the fact that Tiglath-pileser III’s list comprised, alongside many indisputably tribal groupings, entities elsewhere known only as toponyms (Rapiqu, Hir-anu, Rabilu, Radê, Karma’, etc.), might not point so much to an “Assyrian fabrication or simplification”¹², as to the reality of a process of social and territorial subdivision which was underway among the groups themselves.

To be sure, some tribal units had presumably attained early on an ideal balance between their demographical dimensions, their specific territorial quarters, and their distinctive ethnicity. This would seem to be the case of the Utu’/Itu’, who, after their subjugation by Tiglath-pileser III, were integrated into the ranks of the Assyrian administration as a trustworthy corps of “military police” characterized by their original ethnonym (similarly to the “Swiss guards”, the specific military force of the Vatican for the last five centuries). The auxiliary bowmen represented in the Assyrian palace bas-reliefs might refer to this group.¹³

On the other hand, some ethnosocial units of the same type are reported by the contemporary texts as still being in the process of internal accretion, as in the case of the

10 *Ibid.*, 23–28.

11 J. A. Brinkman, *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia*, *cit.*, 274–275.

12 *Ibid.*, 271.

13 J. E. Reade, *The Neo-Assyrian Court and Army: Evidence from the Sculptures*, *Iraq* 34 (1972), 87–112; J. N. Postgate, *The Assyrian Army in Zamua*, *Iraq* 62 (2000), 89–108.

Rupu¹⁴ who had incorporated the smaller group of Q/Gamu according to a letter from Nippur.¹⁴ And finally, the vaster and geographically more dispersed tribal complexes, such as the Puqudu and the Gambulu, while still retaining their distinctive self-identification, prove to have developed a number of inner clan-internal subdivisions with reference to different “sheikhs”, who united their military and political efforts or took individual courses of action, depending on the circumstances. In this case, the possibility that (periodical or random) “conventions” of all the clans could have been organized to decide common tribal policies, is realistic, but has not hitherto surfaced as a specific occurrence in the textual record.

Differently from the long-attested Arameans, the Chaldeans (*Kaldu*) are – quite surprisingly – not documented in the written sources before 878 BC. Their place names, and especially those of their vast territorial and political enclaves, were characterized by the noun *Bīl*, “household”, followed by the linguistically West Semitic personal name of an eponymic ancestor figure, exactly as in the case of the contemporary Aramean states of the Jezirah and Transeuphratene.¹⁵ This feature allows us to postulate a connection of the Chaldeans with the northern and western Arameans in the general perspective of a shared heritage of ethnicity; while some slight hints in the texts might more specifically point to political affiliations of long standing between the Chaldeans and the Aramean tribes of the Middle Euphrates area: e.g. as we shall see below, the rebel Chaldean leader Mukīn-zēri had political contacts with the Arameans of Hindanu, some 300 kms upstream on the Euphrates.

On the other hand, it must be admitted that no straightforward structural similarities between the two main non-indigenous groupings present in the Babylonian area may be traced on the social, economic, and cultural level; quite the contrary is in fact true. This contrast is particularly evident if one observes the settlement patterns of the Chaldeans, and their general socio-economic profile. To be sure, the social structure of the Chaldeans was rigidly centered upon the tribal unit of which all subjects were jointly “members” (*mār*, literally, “son” of the eponymic ancestor) – similarly to the Aramean tribal “households” of the northern Jezirah and inner Syria – but it would be more precise to state that such units represented in fact tribal confederations, which must have undergone a relatively long process of social coalescence, although the latter has left no trace in the written record.

The leader of each tribal confederation was indicated in the Assyrian texts as *ra’su*, “chieftain”. The fact that all such chieftains mutually recognized their status within a wider territorial-political complex which ideally united the different Chaldean confederations, is evident from a Nimrud letter from the time of Tiglath-pileser III¹⁶, in which the young Merodach-baladan is described as “one of the chieftains of the land of Chaldea” (*ina libbi*

14 S. W. Cole, Nippur in Late Assyrian Times, *cit.*, 83, 5–7.

15 For etymologies, cf. E. Lipiński, The Aramaeans, *cit.*, 418–420.

16 H. W. F. Saggs, The Nimrud Letters, 1952, London 2001, 25–26: 5’–6’; cf. § 2 below.

re'asāni ša māt Kaldi). On the other hand, infighting among the various Chaldean chiefs seems to have represented an endemic feature in the framework of the overall subdivision of the southern Mesopotamian area during the earliest periods, and did not cease entirely at the time of Assyrian intervention. Thus, e.g., the archive of the governor of Nippur¹⁷ includes a letter (no. 34) relating a raid undertaken by a Chaldean army (probably including Bit-Amukkani and Bit-Dakkuri, allied at the time) against the Chaldean-dominated city of Larak in order to despoil the harvest. But certainly the Assyrian presence played a major part in determining the choices and alliances of each tribe.

While nominally retaining a social and political structure based on kinship ties, the Chaldeans appear to have taken on a basically sedentary way of life in their southern Euphrates enclaves, with occupations in agriculture, stock raising, and intra-regional trade.¹⁸ The Chaldeans in the Assyrian record (texts and palace reliefs) are shown tending to large tracts of land within their well-watered territorial niches, where they practised agriculture (including date-palm cultivation) and breeding of horses and cattle; however, looking at things on a seasonal basis, they may well have carried out specific forms of “social dimorphism”, entailing intensive agricultural exploitation in the area alongside the rivers, alternated with periods of massified transhumance in steppe sectors.

The territories of the three main Chaldean groupings (Bit-Dakkuri, Bit-Amukkani, Bit-Yakin) extended in a sort of arc along the “living” Euphrates branches from the Borsippa region to the Uruk countryside to the southernmost reaches of the Euphrates around Ur and into the marshlands to the east. Specifically, Bit-Dakkuri probably occupied the cultivated areas along the river from the area of Borsippa (present Birs Nimrud) to that of Marad (present Diwanayah), and thus definitely to the northwest of Bit-Amukkani¹⁹, which controlled a territory in the central sector of southern Mesopotamia, more or less between Nippur and Uruk. Bit-Yakin occupied the more southern sector of the alluvial plane, including ample marshy areas – hence the definition of Merodach-baladan as “king of the Sealand” by Sennacherib.

The structures for communal living within these enclaves comprised not only rural villages and small townships, but also a fair percentage of walled cities. Thus Sennacherib, describing his first campaign into Babylonia (703 BC), boasted of having besieged and conquered 33 walled cities and 250 townships of Bit-Dakkuri; 8 walled cities and 120 townships of Bit-Ša'alli; 39 walled cities and 350 townships of Bit-Amukkani; 8 walled cities and 100 townships of Bit-Yakin – a grand total of 88 major urban sites with defensive structures and 820 smaller settlements of mainly rural character in their environs.²⁰

17 S. W. Cole, *The Early Neo-Babylonian Governor's Archive from Nippur*, Chicago 1996.

18 J. A. Brinkman, *Prelude to Empire. Babylonian Society and Politics*, *cit.*; S. W. Cole, *The Early Neo-Babylonian Governor's Archive from Nippur*, *cit.*

19 S. W. Cole, *Nippur in Late Assyrian Times*, *cit.*, 31.

20 D. D. Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib*, Chicago 1924, 36–50 and 54–56; E. Frahm, *Einleitung in die Sanherib-Inschriften*, Wien 1997, 9.

But the strategic position of the main Chaldean enclaves along the westernmost and southern axes of the alluvium also had crucial implications for commerce. The lists of precious goods offered already in the 9th century, and then again under Tiglath-pileser III, by the Chaldean chiefs as tribute to the Assyrians, which included elephant hides and tusks, ebony and sissoo wood, prove that the Chaldean tribes had gained full control of the trade routes cutting through the Babylonian region²¹, and were thus on the receiving end of a vast commercial network which reached Mesopotamia from the Levant, Northern Arabia, and Egypt by land. Various pieces of information are in agreement in pointing to the fact that a specific “southern Mesopotamian axis” of trade, based on seamanship and the recently introduced large-scale exploitation of the camel as pack-animal, was progressively constituted, such as to antagonize the northern Mesopotamian routes dominated by the Assyrian empire – and which would eventually replace the latter. If we range together a number of specific factors, such as [1] the presence of Arabian allies in the military efforts by the Chaldeans²², [2] a strong thrust for political and military cooperation offered by the Elamite state on the basis of economic advantages²³, and [3] evidence for direct contacts with the Levant²⁴, we may begin to form a coherent picture of the political substructure behind this new commercial axis.

And finally, from the cultural point of view, the Chaldeans embraced Babylonian ways quite soon after their arrival. Both leaders and commoners of the Chaldeans mentioned in the texts bore fully Babylonian personal names, with devotional reference to the traditional Sumero-Akkadian pantheon of the region. This aspect – so obvious in the written record as to be a given – does not seem to have been investigated in depth as regards its possible causes. Much clearer, on the other hand, are the political implications of this clear cultural stance, viz. the capacity of the Chaldeans to enter the arena of military appropriation and territorial supremacy in the Southern Mesopotamian region boasting exactly the same rights as the local population of ancient stock. And the consequences of this capacity would not be long in bearing fruit, under the specific stimulus provided by continuous Assyrian interference in Babylonian affairs.

2. Let us at this point attempt to gain a closer view of indigenous and non-indigenous components of the southern Mesopotamian region as “moving around Babylon”, especially

21 J. A. Brinkman, *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia*, *cit.*, 198–199; G. Frame, *Babylonia 689–627 B.C. A Political History*, Leiden 1992, 37.

22 E.g. Basqanu, the brother of Iati'e, queen of the Arabs, who was captured by Sennacherib in 703 BC: I. Eph'al, “Arabs” in Babylonia in the 8th Century B.C., *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94 (1974), 108–115; S. Parpola (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: I/1–2*, Helsinki 1998–1999, 276a.

23 Beginning with Merodach-baladan's time; cf. J. A. Brinkman, *Elamite Aid to Merodach-Baladan*, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 24 (1965), 161–166.

24 E.g. the offer of an anti-Assyrian alliance by Merodach-baladan to Hezekiah of Judah in 2 *Kings*, 20,12.

in light of the Assyrian effort to subjugate and control the entire southern Mesopotamian region. In consideration of the space of this contribution, but also in view of the fact that the written sources are not evenly distributed over the full century they span, I would on the present occasion limit myself to one specific case-study, relevant to the earliest phases of Assyrian occupation: the revolt of Mukīn-zēri during Tiglath-pileser III's reign as described in the Nimrud letters.²⁵

Nabū-mukīn-zēri, as his full name went, was the chief of the tribal political unit of Bit-Amukkani²⁶; specifically, he was also a personality of great prestige and a crucial reference-point for the neighbouring urban communities such as Nippur, as we know from the local "governor's archive".²⁷ As the standard reconstruction of events goes²⁸, we have it that, in a period of strong dynastic instability in Babylon, Mukīn-zēri removed another rebellious candidate to the throne, Nabū-šuma-ukīn (II), and assumed kingship in 732. Tiglath-pileser III, being occupied by the siege of Damascus, could not react immediately; but the following year he marched to the south against Mukīn-zēri in his residence, the fortified city of Šapiya or Sapiya. This simplified reconstruction is essentially based on the only two passages of Assyrian royal inscriptions that deal with the revolt and its punishment:

"I enclosed Mukīn-zēri of Bit-Amukkani in Sapiya, his royal city. I inflicted a heavy defeat upon him before his city gates. I cut down the orchards and the *mušukkannu*-trees around the city walls, and did not leave a single one. I cut down the date palms throughout his land. I ripped off their fruit and filled the meadows. All of his cities I utterly destroyed and burnt down.

I destroyed Bit-Šilani, Bit-Amukkani, and Bit-Ša'alli completely, like mounds after the flood, and reduced them to mounds of ruins."²⁹

"I smashed [Bit-Amukkani] and brought all its people to Assyria. I enclosed Mukīn-zēri their king in Sapiya, his city."³⁰

25 Cf. F. M. Fales, *Tiglat-Pileser III tra annalistica reale ed epistolografia quotidiana*, in: F. Pecchioli Daddi/M. C. Guidotti (eds.), *Narrare gli Eventi*, Roma 2005, 163–191. I have benefited from a preliminary English translation of this article by Dr. Greta van Buylaere, Cambridge, whom I thank wholeheartedly.

26 S. Parpola (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: II/1-2*, Helsinki 2000, 764a–b.

27 S. W. Cole, *The Early Neo-Babylonian Governor's Archive from Nippur*, *cit.*, texts no. 6, 17–18, 21–22, 97; cf. Id., *Nippur in Late Assyrian Times*, *cit.*, 31–32, for the political relationships between Mukīn-zēri and the *šandabakku* of Nippur.

28 J. A. Brinkman, *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia*, *cit.*, 236. See also Id., art. "Mukīn-zēri", *RIA VIII*, 410–411.

29 Summary Inscription 7:23–25; H. Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III, King of Assyria*, Jerusalem 1994, 162–163.

30 Summary Inscription 11:16; H. Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III*, *cit.*, 196–197.

In both inscriptions, the episode of the siege is squeezed between two other narrative pieces, which include more details, concerning the Chaldean polities adjacent to Bit-Amukkani. After the attack against Šapiya, Tiglath-pileser's official text recalls the dire defeat and capture of the Chaldean chieftains Nabû-ušabši of Bit-Šilani (in the city of Sarrabanu) and Zak/qiru of Bit-Ša'alli (in the capital of Dur(-ša)-Balihayyu).

The fact that this phase could have been, however, partly simultaneous to that of the fight against Bit-Amukkani, might be deduced from the common recapitulation of the destruction with the *topos* on the "post-diluvial *tell*" which ends the narration about Mukīn-zēri in the more extensive inscription. Bit-Šilani should have been adjacent to Bit-Amukkani, considering that its major city, Sarrabanu, joined the latter at the time of Sennacherib. Bit-Ša'alli should, on the other hand, have been located slightly to the northwest of Bit-Amukkani, on the Euphrates side.³¹

Immediately after the description of the siege, then, Tiglath-pileser's larger text has a report on rich tribute brought by other Chaldean chieftains, who voluntarily came into the presence of the king, viz. Balassu of Bit-Dakkuri, Nadinu of Larak, and – especially – Merodach-apla-iddina of Bit-Yakin. Merodach-baladan makes here his debut in Assyrian royal inscriptions, of which – as is well-known – he will become a major protagonist as adversary to the Assyrians until the time of Sennacherib. He is explicitly said by Tiglath-pileser to have brought his own enormous tribute (of gold, pearls, beams of ebony, medicinal plants, multicoloured garments, cattle and sheep) "to Sapiya, in my presence": thus, we may again assume a basic contemporaneity of this episode with the Assyrian takeover of Mukīn-zēri's stronghold immediately after his defeat.

As shall be pointed out below, the Nimrud letters bear out both these hypotheses in full, since all the protagonists of these passages may be shown to have operated at the same time on one or the other side of the military and political divide between the Assyrians and Mukīn-zēri. But how long did the actual engagement between the Assyrian king and this precursor of all later Chaldean rebels actually last? On p. 98 I give a synoptic chart for the main events of the years 731–729³² according to information drawn from the official sources: the Eponym Chronicle, the royal inscriptions (annals and summary inscriptions, stele and rock reliefs) or other sources (in italics).

On the basis of the indication in the "Eponym Chronicle" for the 15th *palû* ("against Šapiya"), it would be possible to date the siege of the city to the first year of this new involvement of Tiglath-pileser III in the Babylonian region, that is, in 731, and likewise to link to it the voluntary submission of Merodach-baladan – following in this Tadmor's reconstruction.³³ On the other hand, a further chronicle text (the "Babylonian Chronicle") provides three additional pieces of information: (a) that Mukīn-zēri ruled for three full

31 S. W. Cole, *Nippur in Late Assyrian Times*, *cit.*, 31.

32 Based on H. Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III*, *cit.* 232–237 and *passim*.

33 H. Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III*, *cit.*, 272.

Legend: TP III = Tiglath-pileser III; ARI = Assyrian royal inscriptions (annals and summary inscriptions); √ = existing narration; / = non-preserved or non-existing narration.				
Year / Regnal year	Eponym Chronicle (quotation or summary)	ARI	Stele, relief, other official source	Summary of the information in the royal inscriptions and/or in other available sources
731 (15 th <i>palû</i>)	“Against Šapiya”	√	/	Defeat of the Chaldean chieftains of central and southern Babylonia. Siege of Šapiya, seat of Nabû-mukîn-zēri of Bit-Amukkani.
730 (16 th <i>palû</i>)	“(The king stayed) in the Land”	/	/	/
729 (17 th <i>palû</i>)	“The king grasped the hands of the god Bel”	/	(<i>Babylonian Chronicle</i>)	<i>Defeat of Nabû-mukîn-zēri, after 3 years of rulership. TP III ascends the Babylonian throne and participates in the New Year’s Festival (in Nisannu of the Babylonian year 728).</i>

years over Babylonia, that (b) in his third year, Tiglath-pileser launched an attack on the region, devastating Bit-Amukkani and defeating the rebel, and that (c) soon after, the Assyrian king ascended the Babylonian throne.³⁴ And since the “Eponym Chronicle” has the notation “the king stayed in the country” for the 16th *palû* whereas the 17th *palû* is characterized as (the year in which) “the king grasped the hands of the god Bēl” – referring thus to the enthronement of Tiglath-pileser in Babylonia – it seems plausible to date the final demise of Mukîn-zēri to 729 BC, in agreement with most specialists.

The essential chronology of the political-military events under examination is thus sufficiently clear, as is also their basic plot (revolt of Mukîn-zēri → Assyrian military intervention → other Chaldean chiefs pay homage to TP III → three years of overall hostilities → final victory and dethronement of the rebel → the Assyrian ruler assumes kingship of Babylonia). However, as noted long ago³⁵, a number of questions pertaining to the political and social context in which the rebellion of Mukîn-zēri took place still remain open. In this light, it is worth pursuing research on the matter by looking at the contemporaneous letters which describe, or touch upon, the rebellion, which come from Nimrud, the ancient capital city of Kalhu.

34 J.-J. Glassner, *Chroniques mésopotamiennes*, Paris 1993, 180.

35 J. A. Brinkman, *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia*, *cit.*, 238.

It barely needs recalling that Nimrud/Kalhu, discovered by Austen Henry Layard and initially believed to be Nineveh, was again excavated by a British expedition led by Max Malolan about one century later. During the campaign of 1952, ca 240 epistolary texts re-emerged in the northeastern area of the site, and specifically in the area known as the “*zigurat* terrace.” These documents were entrusted to the then young philologist Henry William Saggs for a complete publication: however, only 105 of these letters were published in a series of articles appearing from 1955 to 1974 in the journal *Iraq*, after which a long silence ensued. These 105 letters, identified by the *siglum* ND and a number progressively applied to all “small finds” of the Nimrud excavation, epigraphic or not (e.g. ND 2700), received from Saggs an editorial ordering, with the abbreviation N(imrud) L(eters) and a Roman number. Finally, in late 2001, Saggs, by now retired, produced the edition of all the 240 letters in the series *Cuneiform Texts from Nimrud*, complete with copies, transliterations and translations. Despite this vast effort, this edition does not, unfortunately, meet the standards which would have made a half a century’s wait justified, since it largely fails to take into due account the relevant philological-linguistical progress made in the meanwhile, and it is characterized by the absence of all historical comment or chronological specification concerning these epistolary texts. Thus, while awaiting a further (“definitive”) edition, there is much detailed groundwork to be done on such materials.

The sole group of letters from Nimrud/Kalhu for which historical attention of a certain detail was provided in the 2001 edition is the one relating to the Mukīn-zēri revolt.³⁶ Saggs connected a total of 40 texts to this historical episode, of which – in his opinion – 32 were liable to be ordered chronologically or at least on the basis of internal clues.³⁷ However, some doubts about the identity of senders and addressed kings, and, more generally, about the exact chronological phase of several of the letters advise a more cautious reduction of this number to a bit more than one half.

In this light, a twofold division of these sources is in order: a first category (A), in which the Chaldean usurper is directly mentioned (or at least his people, and toponyms with a well-known connection to the sedition), and a second (B), in which the same Mukīn-zēri does not appear, and the links between names/toponyms and the political and military scene of the years 731–729 are more tenuous. The texts of category A (1–12) are presented in the synoptic chart below; while the most important of category B will be merely quoted (by ND number) in the ensuing discussion.

36 See already H. W. F. Saggs, *The Nimrud Letters, 1952 – Part I: The Ukin-zer Rebellion and Other Texts*, *Iraq* 17 (1955), 21–50.

37 H. W. F. Saggs, *The Nimrud Letters, 1952*, London 2001, 9.

No.	Text	Sender and addressee ([] = fragmentary context)	Contextual data, when present	Summary of the context
1	ND 2674 (= H.W.F. Saggs, <i>The Nimrud Letters</i> , 1952, London 2001, 14–17 = NL VI) ³⁸	[], to “my brother”	written by Merodach-balad an (?)	Answer to a request of news by the addressee: Mukīn-zēri has arrived in Babylon with cavalry, blocking the inhabitants of the city within the walls. Fear also in Borsippa, from where the inhabitants evacuate the horses.
2	ND 2695 (= Saggs 2001, 18–19)	Dummuqu to the king		Report: Mukīn-zēri has entered Babylon with ten horses, offering peace to the people. Allusion to 5–6000 horses and mules (fragmentary). He has confirmed: “Do not fear!”
3	ND 2632 (= Saggs 2001, 19–21 = NL I)	Šamaš-bunay and Nabû-nammir to the king		Report of a mission: the two Assyrian officials go to Babylon with proposals of tax exemptions on behalf of TP III, but the citizens, allies of Mukīn-zēri – and in the presence of one of his envoys – do not let them enter. Animated discussion takes place before the city gate: the two Assyrians announce the factual arrival of the king, but the locals maintain that they do not believe the king will come. Threatening to punish the allies and followers of Mukīn-zēri, the two announce their will to remain in Kar-Nergal until the arrival of TP III. Report on the Li’tamu tribe, which sends a message to proclaim its true loyalty to the king. Report on the city of Dīlbat and the actions of Mukīn-zēri over there: fragmentary.
4	ND 2494 (= Saggs 2001, 21–22 = NL LXVI)	[], to the king		Answer to a request of the king to record how many Babylonians “have come over to my side”: no one has come.

38 Henceforth abbreviated as Saggs 2001.

No.	Text	Sender and addressee ([] = fragmentary context)	Contextual data, when present	Summary of the context
5	ND 2717 (= Saggs 2001, 22-25 = NL II)	[], to the king	area between Marad and Dilbat	<p>Report: the Assyrian forces and those of Mukīn-zēri are opposite each other near the territory of a tribe, maybe of Aramaeans (the name is lost), with the common purpose of obtaining an alliance with the latter. The tribesmen seem reluctant to take sides and to continue towards Marad, as the Assyrians – who send a cavalry corps to negotiate – would like.</p> <p>Report of a raid of Mukīn-zēri against the inhabitants of Larak “when he left Sapiya,” and of a raid in the opposite direction by the people of Larak, who took away 20,000 sheep of the Chaldean chieftain, while they were grazing.</p> <p>Report about Babylon: Mukīn-zēri has urged the Babylonians to destroy the date palms of Dilbat, however, only some servants of the temple of Bel have accepted, the others were unwilling.</p>
6	ND 2603 (= Saggs 2001, 25-26 = NL V)	[], to the king		<p>Report: Mukīn-zēri has written to Merodach-baladan, defining him as one of the main Chaldean chieftains, urging him for an alliance, and accusing Balassu (of Bit-Dakkuri) of being one of his rivals, who, moreover, would have ruined the Chaldean land. His message is intercepted and brought to the author of this letter, who is with Balassu. The latter shows signs of deep anxiety, since Mukīn-zēri is the son of his sister. The Assyrians tend to soothe him, encouraging him to go to the aid of the people of Larak, as previously agreed.</p>

No.	Text	Sender and addressee ([] = fragmentary context)	Contextual data, when present	Summary of the context
7	ND 2363 (= Saggs 2001, 35-36, previously unpublished)	[], to the king		Very fragmentary report: Balassu, the city Dur-ladini (of Bit-Dak-kuri) and Nadinu (Chaldean chieftain of Larak) are mentioned in connection with movements of people and means of transportation. The sender says to have returned from Dur-ša-Balihayyu (the capital of Bit-Ša'alli).
8	ND 2360 (= Saggs 2001, 56-57 = NL IV)	[], to the king		Very fragmentary report: Mukīn-zēri and his troops are mentioned, perhaps coming out from the city of Hamete.
9	ND 2636 (= Saggs 2001, 61-63 = NL VII)	[], to the king		Very fragmentary report: Mukīn-zēri is mentioned, and – perhaps – the fact that Bit-Amukkani has abandoned him.
10	ND 2700 (= Saggs 2001, 64-66 = NL III).	[], to the king		Report on several events. A messenger of Mukīn-zēri, named Yadib-ilu', native to a family of Hindana, had been captured by Assyrian auxiliary forces to be sent to the king, but then he fled and went back to Mukīn-zēri.
11	ND 2388 (= Saggs 2001, 57-58, prev. unpub.)	[], to []		Message between two officials (?): fragmentary. The fact that the king has spoken with a messenger of the "sons of Mukīn-zēri" is mentioned.
12	ND 2385 (= Saggs 2001, 45-46 = NL LXV)	Aššur-šallimanni to the king		Report: the forces of the sender, together with the commander in chief have opened the "fortress" (= Šapiya). They reached the urban gates, and defeated the enemy: "Mukīn-zēri is killed/defeated, and his son Šum-ukīn is killed/defeated." As to the rations of the grain ordered by the king for Merodach-baladan, the sender has now – after the battle – provided them.

NOTES TO THE CHART. **No. 1.** As noticed by Saggs (2001, 16), neither of the two correspondents can be the Assyrian king as he is several times mentioned, not only without the habitual formula of courtesy, but even in a passage with a stinging tone (rev. ll. 15–17): “Until you have brought a written reply to my tablet, I shall not agree to send a second message to the king of Assyria”. Following Saggs, Merodach-baladan could have been the author. **No. 2.** Dummuqu was perhaps the founder of a noble Babylonian family, as might be made out from later sources, which recall his descent.³⁸ In any case, the precise reason for the loyalty and dependability of Dummuqu vis-à-vis the Assyrian king is unknown. **No. 3.** In the letters of Nabû-namir³⁹ he is defined as an “official active in Babylonia.” **No. 5.** This letter may be from Šamaš-bunaya, as it deals with Babylon (see letter no. 3). It is certainly not from Aššur-šallimanni, as “the governor of Arrapha” is mentioned. **No. 6.** On Balassu, see now S. Parpola (gen. ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: I/1–2* (ed. K. Radner), Helsinki 1998–1999, 256–258. **No. 12.** The sender is known as the governor of Arrapha, and eponym for the year 735 BC.⁴⁰ Brinkman⁴¹ suggested that Šapiya might be an abbreviated form of the toponym *Ša-pî-Bēl*, the future capital of the province of Gambulu. Note, however, that the derivation from an Akkadian toponym contrasts with the double spelling Sapiya/Šapiya, which rather refers back to the various ways (resp. in Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian) to transcribe the Aramaic phoneme š. On the other hand, in *ibid.* 764b, the name is (erroneously) read as Nabû-ētir.

We may now attempt to provide these epistolary sources with a general chronological and/or logical order, in accordance with the information supplied by the official inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III. **Nos. 1–2** seem to refer to the early stages of the revolt of Mukīn-zēri: the first relates *tout court* of the arrival of cavalry of the Chaldean chieftain near the city of Babylon, blocking the inhabitants within the walls, interrupting the agricultural works. The alarm of the attack extends immediately to nearby Borsippa, from where the horses are evacuated – whether in view of defence, or out of terror for raids, we do not know. In the second letter (no. 2) the picture is more detailed: in fact, we are given to see the rebel with ten of his cavalymen arriving at the regional capital, with a peace offering for the Babylonians, if they should side with him; a fragmentary allusion to a contingent of 5,000–6,000 horses and mules might refer to forces of Mukīn-zēri awaiting outside the city.

In **no. 3**, the alliance with the rebel on the part of the Babylonians – perhaps willy-nilly – seems to have been already sealed, and thus the mission of two officials of the Assyrian king who offer fiscal privileges to the Babylonian citizens in front of the city gates fails miserably, under the attentive gaze of a man of Mukīn-zēri. The two make attempts – with a setting which in the negative recalls the biblical episode of the *rab šaqē* before Jerusalem⁴² – to convince the locals that the arrival of the Assyrian king is impending. However, the Babylonians appear very doubtful on this count, and they definitely refuse the Assyrians entrance

38 Cf. S. Parpola (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: I/1–2*, Helsinki 1998–1999, 387b, where however, this text is not cited, although it is in Id., *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: II/2*, Helsinki 2000, 765a, where it is suggested that the sender wrote from Kutā/Cutha.

39 Cf. S. Parpola (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: II/2*, Helsinki 2000, 855a.

40 Cf. F. M. Fales, *Cento lettere neo-assire*, Venice 1983, 34–37 and 66–67; S. Parpola (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: I/1–2*, Helsinki 1998–1999, 217b.

41 J. A. Brinkman, *Merodach-baladan II*, in: *Studies presented to A. Leo Oppenheim* (Chicago 1964), 112⁸.

42 2 *Kings* 18:17–37; cf. G. Frame, *Babylonia 689–627 B.C. cit.*, 140.

within the walls; thus the officials are forced to return to the encampment at Kar-Nergal (near Kutâ), while threatening the Babylonians with heavy punishments in the future. In any case, it may be noted that there is no hint in this letter (or elsewhere in the epistolary material under examination) concerning the fact that Mukîn-zēri had seized the Babylonian crown for himself, as is instead indicated in the Babylonian chronicle.

The scenario drawn by this letter is, however, very rich regarding other developments, both military and diplomatic: Mukîn-zēri is said to be moving towards the nearby city of Dilbat, which was probably pro-Assyrian⁴³, whereas the Aramean tribe of Li'tamu, already subjugated by Tiglath-pileser III (as we know from official texts) has sent a message of loyalty to the Assyrians. Also the brief message **no. 4** seems to refer to this phase, with the sender communicating to the king that he cannot record – at least for the moment – any pro-Assyrian defection in the Babylonian ranks.

From letter **no. 5**, which gathers together reports from different areas, we gain a picture of the troops of Mukîn-zēri in action over the entire northern sector of lower Mesopotamia, from the flood basin of the Euphrates to that of the Tigris. In a first report, we find the Assyrian and Chaldean troops encamped opposite each other in an unspecified location, while the respective representatives attempt to obtain an alliance with an Aramean tribe (the name is lost); the latter is holed up in a settlement, instead of moving off towards Marad, as had been requested by the Assyrians. The second report must contain a flash-back, since it recalls a plundering action on the part of Mukîn-zēri, after leaving his stronghold of Šapiya, against the eastern city of Larak (of which the Chaldean chieftain Nadinu, an ally of the Assyrians according to the official texts, was in charge). Subsequently – so the report goes – the inhabitants of Larak took revenge by raiding 20,000 sheep of Mukîn-zēri at pasture. Finally, the sender's focus shifts back to the west, to Babylon, with the news that only some Babylonians had followed Mukîn-zēri in his foray to pillage the palm trees of Dilbat, whereas most of them were reluctant – which may be taken as good news for the Assyrian king.

In text **no. 6** Merodach-baladan enters the scene, albeit indirectly. Mukîn-zēri had made a concrete offer of alliance to the chief of Bit-Yakin, blandishing him as one of the great leaders of the Chaldeans, and at the same time accusing Balassu of Bit-Dakkuri of being a traitor, who brought the Chaldeans to ruin (the two had in fact been military allies in the past, as recalled above). Mukîn-zēri's message, having been intercepted and confiscated by the Assyrians, is read to Balassu, who shows some anxiety about continuing his policy of loyalty towards Tiglath-pileser III, due to his family ties with Mukîn-zēri (who is his nephew) and for fear of concrete reprisals on the part of the rebel. The Assyrians cannot but blandish him in their turn, urging him to proceed to Larak – as already agreed – thus providing some relief to that city. And in point of fact, a letter of group B, ND 2365, confirms the presence of Balassu at the side of the Assyrians in military operations.

43 J. A. Brinkman, *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia*, *cit.*, 237.

Further letters of group B, i.e.: ND 2389 (by Merodach-baladan, who declares his loyalty to Tiglath-pileser III), ND 2663 (movement of Assyrian troops in connection with the road to Larak) and ND 2779 (mentioning Merodach-baladan together with the Aramean tribes of Li'tamu and Hagaranu) should refer to this same phase – in which the Assyrians kept fast or even strengthened their alliance with Bit-Dakkuri, Larak, and Bit-Yakin.

Subsequently, we might range the very fragmentary letter **no. 7**: here Balassu and Nadinu are mentioned together, in connection with war activities, and there is a hint to an Assyrian presence in Dur-ša-Balihayyu, the capital of Bit-Ša'alli. This mention might imply that – at the time of the rebellion of Mukīn-zēri – the war operations against this other centre of anti-Assyrian sedition had been finished, in some agreement with the order of events to be made out from the royal inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III. Another fragmentary letter (ND 2444), by an unknown author, mentions one Nabû-ušebši and people passing from his jurisdiction to the Assyrian one: according to Saggs⁴⁴ this might be a graphical variant of the name of Nabû-ušabši, the Chaldean chief of Bit-Šilani.⁴⁵

The subsequent development of the war, both on the field, and in its political-diplomatic aspects, is relatively obscure. Two letters (**nos. 10, 11**) show the capture of messengers sent to Mukīn-zēri (or to his “sons”) by the Assyrians: the fact that one of these messengers was an Aramean of Hindana/u – an area on the middle-lower Euphrates known for its long-standing cultural and political connections with Babylonia – allows us to surmise that Mukīn-zēri had attempted to extend his alliances to territories subjected to Assyrian political dominion. From text **no. 8** it is clear that Mukīn-zēri's activity in battle entailed the capture of centres hostile to him; but on the other hand, he might have progressively lost the support of his own people (letter **no. 9** seems to hint to desertions in Bit-Amukkani).

Some further letters of group B might also refer to the conclusive part of the hostility against Bit-Amukkani. Thus, of the three letters signed by Šamaš-bunaya, a high-ranking official (cf. below), ND 2663 and ND 2628 relate movements of Assyrian auxiliary troops and of civilian refugees in the central-eastern zone of the alluvium between Nippur and Larak, and are perhaps to be placed in the intermediate phases of the hostility; while ND 2403, very fragmentary, might refer to the political reconciliation of Tiglath-pileser III with the city of Babylon, after the hostilities against Mukīn-zēri were concluded.

We arrive thus to letter **no. 12**, which is the most significant of this group of epistolary documents from Kalhu. This text bears a first-hand account of the capture of Šapiya, the starting place of the hostilities, where Mukīn-zēri seems to have been forced to return due to the progressive narrowing of the circle of alliances which initially supported him. The report on the battle sent to the king is authored by the governor of Arrapha, Aššur-šallimanni,

44 H. W. F. Saggs, *The Nimrud Letters*, 1952, London 2001, 40.

45 Cf. S. Parpola (ed.), *The Prosopography of the Neo-Assyrian Empire: II/2*, Helsinki 2000, 901a.

a eunuch, who is mentioned in the official texts of Tiglath-pileser III in connection with another victory in southern Mesopotamia:

“That Puqudu (tribe) and the city Lahiru of Idibirina, and the cities of Hilimmu (and) Pillutu, which are on the border of Elam, I annexed to Assyria, and I placed them under the control of my eunuch, the governor of Arrapha.”⁴⁶

The content of letter no. 12 lends itself to some detailed observations. First of all, it may be noted that the exact place of the battle is not specified, since it was obviously well-known to both the sender and the addressee, and is described merely as “the fortress” (*bi[r-ta]*, l. 4): this led Saggs to believe that the location of the battle was Babylon.⁴⁷ However, as observed by Brinkman⁴⁸, there is no proof of Chaldean resistance in that city, and – as said above – the letters hitherto examined rather leave the impression of an alliance with the rebel *nolens volens* on the part of the Babylonians. Thus, the most likely location for the battle remains Šapiya; especially because of the references to “the city gates” (*abullāte*) and the consequent “defeat” (*duāku/dāku*) on ll. 7–9 of the obverse,

ina libbi abullāte / niqṭirib diktu / niddu'ak

“we have reached within the city gates, and we have inflicted a defeat”

which recalls of course, in the same terms and in the same order, the description of the battle of Šapiya as provided by the official inscriptions:

ina Sapiē āl šarrūtišu ērišu diktašu ma'attu ina pān abullātešu adūk

“in Sapiya, his royal city, I enclosed him; I inflicted a heavy defeat upon him before his city gates”.⁴⁹

On the other hand, a basic inconsistency between the two sources should be underscored here: the official text speaks of a pitched battle *before* the gates, while the epistolary text indicates a hand-to-hand combat taking place *inside* the enemy city itself. But this is not all: the author of the letter goes on to describe how he and the other Assyrian commander, the *turtānu* – who might have been the Šamaš-bunaya mentioned above – were forced to advance inch by inch against a stiff resistance by the Chaldeans:

issurri šarru bēlī / iqabbi mā ina libbi abullāte / idukū ilāni ša šarri bēlīya / šumma 1 ammatu 1 rūṭu ina qabli āli / la erabūni / šarru bēlī liš'al

“Perhaps the king, my lord, will say: ‘(already) within the city gates they defeated them’ – (but) I swear by the gods of the king, my lord, that they (=the Assyrian soldiers) penetrated cubit after cubit, span after span, within the city! May the king, my lord, request information (on this count)!”

46 H. Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III, cit.*, 160–161, Summary Inscription 7, ll. 13–14.

47 H. W. F. Saggs, *The Nimrud Letters*, 1952, London 2001, 11.

48 J. A. Brinkman, *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia, cit.*, 238¹⁵²⁹.

49 H. Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III, cit.*, 160–161, Summary Inscription 7:23.

And finally: what happened to Mukīn-zēri? Here we have to deal with a further point of inconsistency between the sources. Against the total silence of the royal inscriptions on the personal fate of the defeated Mukīn-zēri, we may note the precise description supplied by the governor of Arrapha in his letter (ll. 9–14):

Mukīn-zēri / dēki Šum-ukīn mārušu / dēki ālu kašdu šū / šarru bēli lū hadi / šarru bēli / pān mār šiprini liddin

“Mukīn-zēri has been defeated/killed; his son Šum-ukīn has been defeated/killed; the whole city has been taken; may the king, my lord, rejoice. May the king, my lord, give audience to our messenger.”

This passage has given rise to a small *crux interpretum*, due to the fact that the verb *duāku/dāku* means “to defeat” (especially with the internal object *diktu*, as in the passages quoted above), but also “to kill,” with a certain indifference of use, both in Neo-Assyrian and in Standard Babylonian. Thus, Brinkman⁵⁰ opted for the hypothesis of the defeat, indicating that “Mukīn-zēri remained at large”, while Saggs espoused since 1955 the hypothesis of a killing, on the basis of the repetition of the verbal form applied to both father and son, which would have been superfluous in the case of a mere defeat. To be sure, partially in favour of Saggs, it may be observed that if the two had survived the clash – as prisoners or as fugitives – the question would certainly have deserved some extra words by Aššur-šallimanni. On the other hand, a Babylonian deed⁵¹ is dated to the fourth year of Mukīn-zēri’s reign: and, barring the case of an error or mere misinformation on the part of the scribe⁵², it might somehow support the notion that Mukīn-zēri was still alive and active in at least part of the territory of southern Mesopotamia in 728 BC. Thus, at the end of the day, the question of Mukīn-zēri’s exact fate remains open.

Summing up, the letter of Aššur-šallimanni contains the account of a fierce battle which took place at Šapiya/Sapiya, and which ended with the Assyrians entering the stronghold through the gates, conquering the city through hand-to-hand combat, and defeating – or perhaps even killing – the two Chaldean chiefs at the head the defence, Mukīn-zēri and his son Šum-ukīn. This letter thus provides us with a rare account of a “classic” Assyrian victory, presumably based on a high number of attacking troops (since two army corps might have been joined for the purpose), on the availability of a superior technology for all forms of armed encounter, and – no doubt – on the unconditional devotion to the imperial cause shown by the Assyrian commanders. In short, this letter describes one of those battles of siege and subsequent conquest of enemy cities that the Assyrian bas-reliefs illustrate

50 J. A. Brinkman, *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia*, *cit.*, 238¹⁵²⁹.

51 A. T. Clay, *Babylonian Business Transactions of the First Millennium B.C.* (= *Babylonian Records in the Library of J. Pierpont Morgan*, I), New York 1912, note 22; cf. J. A. Brinkman, *A Political History of Post-Kassite Babylonia*, *cit.*, 239, 284.

52 As, e.g., suggested by J.-J. Glassner, *Chroniques mésopotamiennes*, Paris 1993, 262.

in great detail, against the largely stereotyped accounts of the contemporaneous royal inscriptions.

Further historiographic results are the following: (A) the siege of Šapiya certainly did not take three years; while it was probably undertaken in 731 BC (= 15th *palû*) by Tiglath-pileser III himself, it must have been lifted subsequently for unknown reasons. The Nimrud letters speak of a siege/attack on Šapiya only in letter no. 12, presumably to be dated to 729 BC (= the third year of Mukīn-zēri's revolt), with the commanders writing to Tiglath-pileser who was residing in Assyria (as he had already done during the previous year, his 16th *palû*). (B) The conquest of Šapiya must have taken place at a later date of 729 BC than the editing of Summary Inscription no. 7, the purpose of which was to celebrate the restoration of the palace at Kalhu. This would explain the basic differences between the official inscription, which has the Assyrians engaging the enemy *before* the city gates, and Aššur-šallimanni's letter, which shows the troops operating fully *inside* the same gates. The obvious conclusion is, therefore, that the official texts of Tiglath-pileser were not subsequently "updated" with more recent information regarding the final outcome of the war against the Chaldean rebel – or, alternatively, that such an updated version has not come down to us.

But let us return once more to the main theme of this contribution, which is that of a view of non-indigenous groups "moving around Babylon", with alternatively peaceful and hostile stances vis-à-vis Assyrian interference. The Mukīn-zēri epistolary dossier shows once more the full cast of characters which was introduced in section § 1, above, albeit now endowed with movement and with complex reciprocal relations.

In the first place, we are given to observe the inhabitants of the ancient cities of the southern alluvium – and especially the people of Babylon itself – as floundering in the political and military net that has been cast around them: deeply distrustful of the Assyrians, but no less terrified of the Chaldeans, they practice forms of passive resistance which seem to lead nowhere, and often become the helpless prey of raids and other forms of violence. The second group which stands out is that of the Aramean tribesmen: they seem to resent the military struggle taking place around them as much as the city-dwellers, but possibly only insofar as it impinges upon their freedom of movement and their socio-economic autarchy. Accordingly, they choose to side with one or the other opponent, but do not seem particularly bent on participating to the action in person – at least, not for the time being. And finally, we have the Chaldeans, whom the revolt of Mukīn-zēri catches in the process of (re)defining their mutual political relations: in other words, this first major interference of the Assyrians in Babylonian affairs seems to represent a unique opportunity to measure the respective strength of the individual confederations and of their smaller camp-followers – but not without some personal and political qualms reflecting the tight gentile structure among the groups, as in the case of Balassu of Bit-Dakkuri, who was the uncle of Mukīn-zēri of Bit-Amukkani.

As is well known, all these actions and interrelations of the main protagonists of the southern Mesopotamian scenario were destined to become even more complex quite soon thereafter, with Merodach-baladan's rise to power. It may thus be useful to recall that Aššur-šallimanni's letter bears a further passage, relevant to Tiglath-pileser's order to send grain rations to the chief of Bit-Yakin, obviously as reward for his allegiance to the Assyrians (reverse, ll. 7–10):

“Regarding the barley rations which are destined to Merodach-baladan, of which the king, my lord, had spoken – after I saw the defeat, I wrote that they should transport (them)”

No doubt, Merodach-baladan's commitment to Tiglath-pileser's cause should be dated as early as 731 BC – in agreement with Tadmor's reconstruction – when the chief of Bit-Yakin brought rich tribute to Šapiya, subjecting himself to the Assyrian ruler together with Bit-Dakkuri and Larak. Subsequently, as we have seen, he was courted by Mukīn-zēri, but – with a certain foresight – chose to decline the offer by Bit-Amukkani and to declare anew his fealty to the Assyrian king, perhaps even participating to some extent to military operations. Thus, as soon as Mukīn-zēri's revolt had been definitely quenched, he was awarded by the Assyrians the benefit of a large consignment of barley – which probably came out from the grain stores of conquered Šapiya.

However, Tiglath-pileser III was destined to die a mere two years after taking over the Babylonian throne; and – after the brief reign of Shalmaneser V – it was his son Sargon II⁵³ who would be called to deal, for a very long time and often on the very same theatre of operations, with the chief of Bit-Yakin. Merodach-baladan had by that time prepared the political and military scenario so as to be able to seize anew the throne of Babylon, and to rule on much more efficacious terms than his predecessor Mukīn-zēri. So adroit were his moves, in fact, that he would survive his new and powerful adversary even through defeat and exile, and yield in the end only to the overwhelming might of a third Assyrian king. Thus, when his final demise against Sennacherib occurred, no less than thirty years had gone by after his first appearance on the scene at S/Šapiya – when he was forced to bind himself to the cause of Tiglath-pileser, but was surely already “moving around Babylon” in his plans.

53 F. Thomas, Sargon II., der Sohn Tiglath-pileasers III, in: Festschrift für Kurt Bergerhof, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1993, 465–470.