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Through Assyria's Eyes: Israel's Relationship with Judah

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The Hebrew Bible records the history of ancient Israel and Judah, relating that the two kingdoms were united under Saul (ca. 1000 B.C.) and became politically separate following Solomon's death (ca. 935 B.C.). The division continued until the Assyrians, whose empire was expanding during that period, exiled Israel in the late eighth century B.C.

But the goal of the Bible was not to record history, and the text does not shy away from theological explanations for events. Given this problematic relationship between sacred interpretation and historical accuracy, historians welcomed the discovery of ancient Assyrian cuneiform documents that refer to people and places mentioned in the Bible. Discovered in the 19th century, these historical records are now being used by scholars to corroborate and augment the biblical text, especially the Bible's "historical books" of Kings. This field for comparison complements the recent trend among biblical scholars of using new interpretative methodologies and archaeology to question some of the Bible's historical claims.

ISRAEL BY ANY OTHER NAME

The one reference to Israel in the surviving Assyrian materials dates to the reign of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (858–824 B.C.). Ahab of Israel is listed as part of a coalition of 12 city-states — including Damascus, the Arabs, Byblos, and Egypt — that engaged Shalmaneser III in battle in his sixth year. While the reference to Ahab is the only mention of Israel in the Assyrian inscriptions, that is not to say that Assyria did not have further contact with what the Hebrew Bible names Israel, only that the Assyrians never again used the term Israel in their inscriptions. Another term for biblical Israel appears later in the same king's

reign. In three different inscriptions, Shalmaneser III recounts that he received tribute from Tyre, Sidon, and Jehu, son of Omri, in his 18th year, usually figured as 841 B.C. Thus, Jehu, the next Israelite king to whom the Assyrians refer, appears in the same order as described in the Bible. But he is identified as ruling a place with a different geographic name, Bit Omri (the house of Omri).

One of Shalmaneser III's final editions of annals, the Black Obelisk, contains another reference to Jehu. In the second row of figures from the top, Jehu is depicted with the caption, "Tribute of Iaua (Jehu), son of Omri. Silver, gold, a golden bowl, a golden beaker, golden goblets, pitchers of gold, lead, staves for the hand of the king, javelins, I received from him." As scholar Michele Marcus points out, Jehu's placement on this monument indicates that his importance for the Assyrians stems from the fact that he is from an area representing the farthest reach of the Assyrian state.

Along with the new name is a change in Israel's relationship to Assyria. When Ahab governed Israel it was active in a coalition of city-states that militarily opposed Assyria. In the later inscriptions, Jehu brought tribute to Shalmaneser III. In the final inscription the position of Jehu is that of ruler of a region that functions as a secure border of Assyria. Thus, as the Assyrians portrayed this relationship, the change in name is a shift in the nature of the relationship between Israel and Assyria, from one of active hostility to one of subservience.

The Bible makes no reference to Jehu's relationship with Assyria, but some elements in Jehu's reign that are



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through
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 with judah

TOP: Image of Assyrian king Shalmaneser III on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III found at Nimrud

by Tammi J. Schneider



TIMELINE

Year B.C.	Assyria	Israel	Judah
		Saul	Saul
1000	Ashur-rabi II (1012–972)	David (1005–965)	David
	Tiglath-pileasar II (966–935)	Solomon (968–928)	Solomon
950		Jeroboam (928–907)	Rehoboam (928–911)
			Abijam (911–908)
	Adad-nirari II (911–891)		Asa (908–867)
		Nadab (907–906)	
900		Baasha (906–883)	
	Tukulti-Ninurta II (890–884)	Elah (883–882)	
	Ashurnasirpal II (883–859)	Zimri (882)	
		Omri (882–871)	Jehoshaphat (870–846)
	Shalmaneser III (858–824)	Ahab (873–852)	
850		Ahaziah (852–851)	Jehoram (851–843)
		Jehoram (851–842)	
		Jehu (841–814)	Ahaziah (843–842)
	Shamshi-Adad V (824–811)	Jehoahaz (817–800)	Athaliah (842–836)
	Adad-nirari III (810–783)		Joash (836–798)
			Amaziah (798–769)
800		Jehoash (800–784)	Azariah (785–733)
	Shalmaneser IV (783–773)		
	Ashur-dan III (772–755)	Jeroboam II (789–748)	Jotham (758–743)
	Ashur-nirari V (755–745)		
750		Zechariah (747)	
		Shallum (747)	
	Tiglath-pileasar III (745–727)	Menahem (747–737)	Jehoahaz (743–727)
		Pekahiah (737–735)	
		Pekah (735–732)	
	Shalmaneser V (726–722)	Hoshea (732–724)	Hezekiah (727–698)
	Sargon II (722–705)	Fall of Samaria 722	

Table 1. There are many differing dates, especially for the kings of Israel and Judah. Here Israelite and Judean kings are tied to the Assyrian kings for comparative purposes.

mentioned in the Bible are relevant here. Jehu came to the throne in a bloody coup where he destroyed King Jehoram and the house of Ahab, the previous Israelite king (2 Kings 9:1–10, 20; 2 Kings 10). He even took revenge on the royal family of Judah, killing their King Ahaziah (2 Kings 9:27). Despite the severity of his coup, Jehu has a fairly good reputation in the biblical text, at least for a king of Israel (2 Kings 10:28–31), because he rid Israel of the house of Ahab. The house of Ahab was one of the most disliked by the biblical authors because Ahab married a foreign woman, Jezebel, the daughter of King Ethbaal of Sidon, and even built a temple to Baal in Samaria (1 Kings 16:29–33). Perhaps because the Assyrians are responsible for the destruction of Israel,

LEFT: General timeline.

There are many differing dates, especially for the kings of Israel and Judah. Here, Israelite and Judean kings are tied to the Assyrian kings for comparative purposes.

the author(s) of Kings may not have wanted to discredit Jehu — who bought his security to the throne by becoming an Assyrian vassal — by mentioning this relationship.

Despite changes in Assyria and its relationship with the region following Shalmaneser III's death, Assyrian texts continue to refer to Israel as Bit Omri until Israel's destruction. The Assyrian king Adad-nirari III (810–783 B.C.) first introduces the name Samaria into the picture. Samaria is likely another reference to Israel because it became the capital of Bit Omri/Israel beginning in King Omri's day (1 Kings 16:24). Adad-nirari III notes that Jehoash of Samaria (800–784 B.C.) paid him tribute. The other kings who paid tribute to Assyria in

the same campaign were the kings of Damascus, Tyre, and Sidon. Here, the Bible is silent.

Tiglath-pileasar III (745–727 B.C.), who ushered in a new era of expansion for Assyria, is the next Assyrian king to refer to Bit Omri, Samaria, and Judah. In two inscriptions, the name Bit Omri defines Aram's borders. One of the inscriptions includes events in the land of Bit Omri, but what occurred is lost in a break in the text. The result of the action in the break is that Tiglath-pileasar III carries off Bit Omri's people to Assyria, which is confirmed by a third inscription.

Tiglath-pileasar III also states that someone killed Pekah, Bit Omri's king, and installed Hoshea on Bit Omri's throne. Elsewhere Tiglath-pileasar III notes that

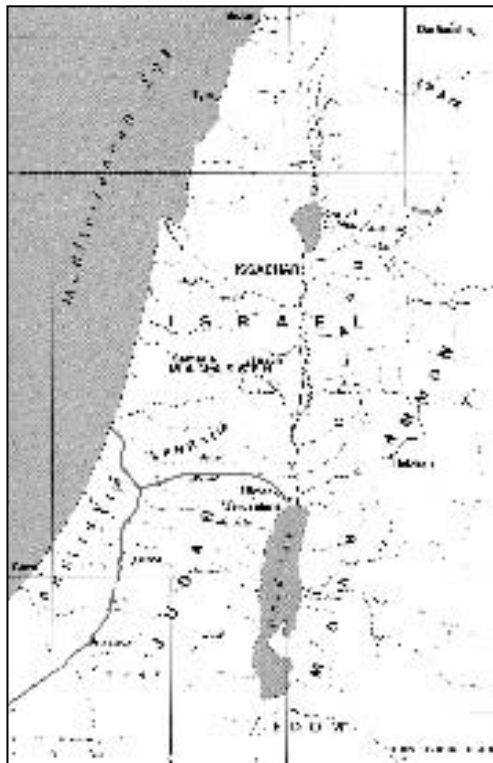
despite devastating the cities of Bit Omri, he did not destroy Samaria, but Pekah, their king, was overthrown. Writing about the inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser, Hayim Tadmor explains that the main clause “they overthrew” is not preserved but must have referred to the fall of Pekah.

Without reference to Bit Omri, Tiglath-pileser III’s annals mention Menahem, King of Samaria, two times between Rezin of Damascus and Tuba’il of Tyre. The reference on Stele III A further defines all those listed on Stele III A as kings of Hatti and the Aramaeans of the western seashore; Judah does not appear in these lists.

ENTER JUDAH

When Tiglath-pileser III does mention the land of Judah in a tribute list, it is with very different contemporaries. Summary Inscription 7 lists Jehoahaz of Judah between Mitini of Ashkelon and Qaushmalaka of Edom. Earlier, this inscription includes Menahem’s contemporaries, such as Hiram of Tyre, Kushtashpi of Kummuh, Urik of Que, and Ussame of Tabal, though neither Menahem, Samaria, or Bit Omri is mentioned. Another difference between the lists may be in their dating.

Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor have noted that Tiglath-pileser III’s Summary Inscription 7 separates the states into two groups: the Syro-Anatolian kings who paid tribute in 738 B.C., and the Syro-Palestinian kings who paid on another occasion. Thus, according to the Assyrians, Samaria/Bit Omri and Judah are in different locales, paid tribute in different years, and were



The region of Israel, Judah, and some of the major cities, surrounding nations, and tribal areas

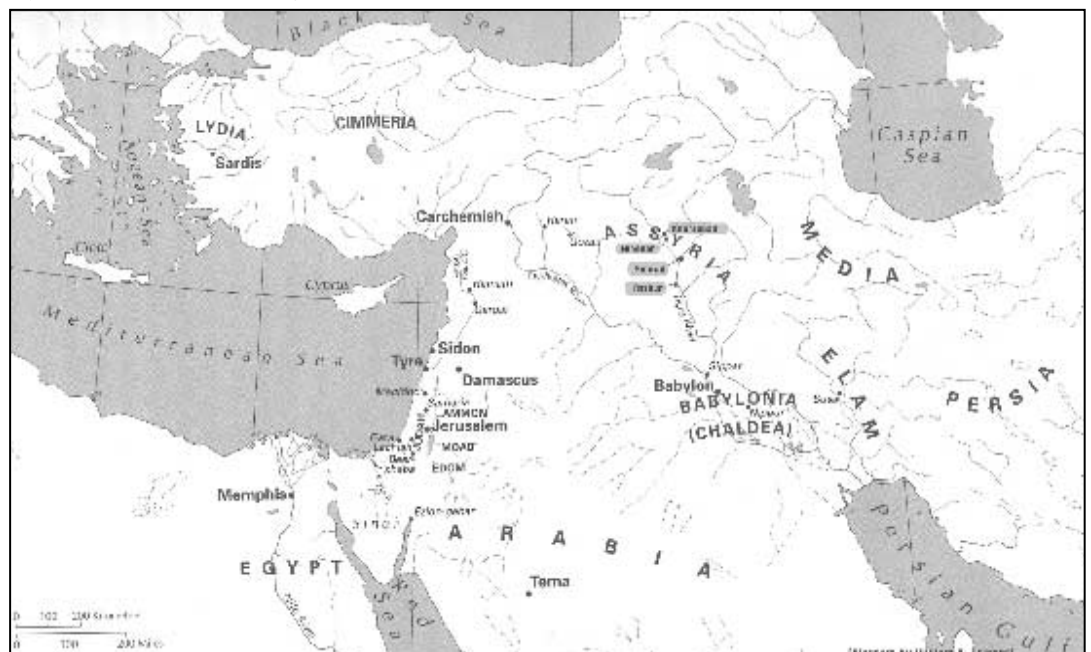
associated with different groups of cities. The Assyrian sources are mute about why Judah paid tribute to Assyria and under what conditions. According to the Eponym Chronicle for the year 734 B.C., Tiglath-pileser III went to Philistia. The texts from these years are rather mutilated, providing no details explaining Assyria’s interest in the area.

The Bible adds to the discussion, in 2 Kings 15:17, when Menahem, son of Gadi, becomes king in Samaria. Line 19 states, “King Pul [Tiglath-pileser III’s nickname] of Assyria invaded the land, and Menahem

gave Pul a thousand talents of silver that he might support him and strengthen his hold on the kingdom.”

Possibly, Assyrian sources do not mention Menahem’s son and successor Pekahiah because, “His [Pekahiah’s] aide, Pekah son of Remaliah, conspired against him and struck him down in the royal palace in Samaria...” (2 Kings 15:25). Pekah’s interaction with Tiglath-pileser III is described in line 29: “In the days of King Pekah of Israel, King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria came and captured Ijob, Abel-beth-maacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor-Gilead,

Map of the first millennium B.C. Ancient Near East, highlighting the heartland of Assyria



Galilee, the entire region of Naphtali, and he deported the inhabitants to Assyria.” Line 30 agrees with Assyrian inscriptions, adding, “Hoshea son of Elah conspired against Pekah son of Remaliah, attacked him, and killed him. He succeeded him as king...”

Other events in Pekah’s reign are relevant. In 2 Kings 16:5, the king of Aram and King Pekah advanced on Jerusalem in a battle and besieged Ahaz of Judah, and “Ahaz sent messengers to King Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria to say, ‘I am your servant and your son; come and deliver me from the hands of the king of Aram and from the hands of the king of Israel who are attacking me.’” (2 Kings 16:7). According to the Bible, Ahaz went to Damascus to meet the king of Assyria, who responded to his request by marching against Damascus, capturing it, and deporting its inhabitants.

JUDAH AND ISRAEL BEYOND THE BIBLE

The Assyrian and biblical references agree that Tiglath-pileser III campaigned in the region of Israel and Judah. Tiglath-pileser III knew the rulers of the surrounding communities, and the Assyrian comments, preserved in the cuneiform tablets, conform generally to what the biblical text provides. According to Assyrian records, Menahem paid a large sum to Tiglath-pileser III. Biblical scholars Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor note that the amount Menahem paid was identical to that paid by Hulli, king of Tabal, and Metenna, king of Tyre, both vassal kings who were usurpers, and their payments bought Assyrian support, thereby legitimizing their rule. Thus the Assyriological evidence supports the biblical contention that Menahem paid tribute to Assyria to gain support for his tenuous hold on the throne.

In contrast, Judah’s entrance into a tribute-bearing status with Assyria does not have documented support beyond the Bible’s account. There are even hints in the Bible that raise doubts about the account’s authenticity. The biblical explanation for why Assyria entered the area is that Israel attacked Judah, and

Judah went to Assyria for protection (2 Kings 16:7). In verse 7, Ahaz writes to Tiglath-pileser III referring to himself as “your servant and your son.” Cogan and Tadmor claim that this combination of terms is unique in the Bible and is rarely attested in non-biblical historical documents. Moreover, the biblical writer reveals that paying the Assyrians is viewed negatively by using the term *šōhad* [bribe] for Ahaz’s payment to Tiglath-pileser III.

The Book of Kings gives Ahaz a negative evaluation, so it is fitting that the biblical writer would implicate him in involving Assyria against Israel. The biblical text claims Ahaz passed his child through fire in an “abhorrent fashion” (2 Kings 16:3) and removed fixtures from the temple in Jerusalem to pay his bribe (2 Kings 16:17). In this context scholars argue whether Judah’s plea brought Assyria to the region or whether Judah asked for Assyria’s help once the Assyrians were already there. But did Ahaz

pay the Assyrians to protect himself against Israel, as described in Kings, or was his payment part of the tribute that the other states in his region offered under Tiglath-pileser III’s threat of attack? Might the biblical author(s) portray the tribute as blame upon Ahaz for involving Judah with Assyria, thereby playing a role in the destruction of Israel, just as Jehu, in reverse, was protected from this critique?

Little information remains regarding Tiglath-pileser III’s heir and successor, Shalmaneser V (726–722 B.C.). The Bible notes that Hoshea, the king put on the throne of Samaria by Tiglath-pileser III, revolted and that Shalmaneser besieged Samaria for three years (2 Kings 17:4-6). Beyond the Bible the only other data regarding this incident is from the Babylonian Chronicle, a document recording the reigns of the Babylonian kings, including information about the relationship between Babylonia and Assyria. The Babylonian Chronicle comments only that “He [Shalmaneser V] demolished Samaria.”

The next references to “Israel” date to the reign of Sargon II (722–705 B.C.), who claims responsibility for the defeat and exile

of Bit-Omri/Israel. In one text Sargon asserts, “I besieged and con-



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quered Samaria, I led away as booty 27,299 inhabitants. I formed from among them a contingent of 50 chariots and made remaining [inhabitants] assume their positions. I installed over them an officer and imposed upon them the tribute of the former king.” Sargon II’s annals add that



Jehu, son of Omri, bringing tribute to Shalmaneser III, from the Black Obelisk, with the caption “Tribute of Jehu, son of Omri...”

the conquest of Samaria occurred “at the beginning of my royal rule” and “I rebuilt the town better than it was before and settled therein people from countries which I myself had conquered.”

Sargon II provides background history to the defeat of Bit Omri: “Ia’ubidi from Hamath, a commoner without claim to the throne, a cursed Hittite, schemed to become king of Hamath, induced the cities Arvad, Simirra, Damascus, and Samaria to desert me, made them collaborate and fitted out an army.” Sargon II’s capture of Samaria and Bit Omri was important enough that he brags about it in a paving inscription claiming, “Property of Sargon, conqueror of Samaria and the entire country of Bit Omri.”

Sargon II’s annals also note, “Upon a trust inspiring oracle given by my lord Ashur, I crushed the tribes of Tamud, Ibadidi, Marsimanu, and Haiapa, the Arabs who live far away in the desert and who know neither overseers nor officials and who had not yet brought their tribute to any king. I deported their survivors and settled them in Samaria.” Sargon II deported the inhabitants of Samaria and brought captives from other destroyed cities into Samaria. The passage from 2 Kings 17:6 locates the “lost ten tribes” in Halah, at the river Habor, at the

River Gozan, and in the towns of Media.

Sargon II’s account does not differ considerably from the report provided in 2 Kings 17. According to Kings 2, Shalmaneser was king of Assyria when the siege of Samaria began but does not mention who ruled the city when it was captured and its citi-

zens deported. The biblical text claims the reason for the attack was that Samaria’s king, Hoshea, conspired with “So, the king of Egypt,” and as a result ceased sending tribute (2 Kings 17:4).

WHERE THEY DIFFER

The major difference between the biblical and the Assyrian texts concerns who induced Israel to revolt. While the Bible states that Samaria’s king conspired with So, the king of Egypt, in the Assyrian material, the Aramaeans led Samaria’s ruler astray. Furthermore, beyond biblical and Assyrian sources, no Egyptian sources provide a candidate for a king So,

though Egyptian rebels and auxiliary forces were defeated by rebels from Gaza at the battle of Rafiah.

Sargon II mentions Judah in two contexts. The first is an inscription defining property where he calls himself “the subduer of the country Judah, which is far away, the uprooter of Hamath.” This inscription couples Judah with the ruler referred to as starting the trouble leading to Samaria/Bit Omri’s destruction. The inscription does not relate Judah to Bit Omri, but to Hamath.

The second reference to Judah appears in a fragmentary prism



Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III from Nimrud

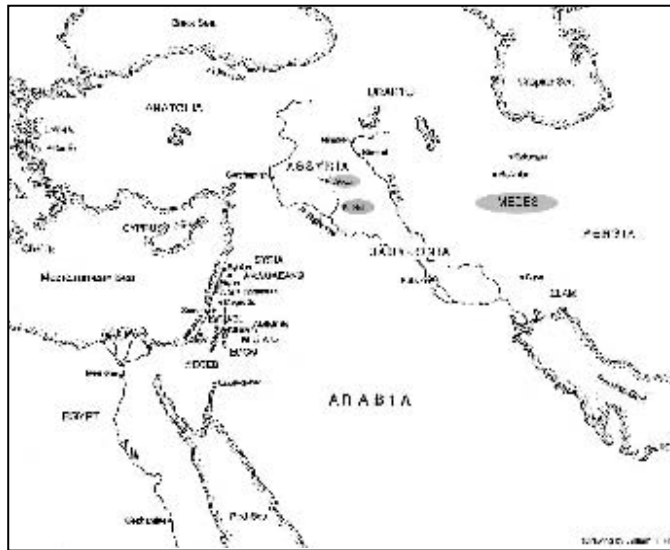
that describes Assyria's suppression of a revolt spearheaded by Ashdod: "Together with the rulers of Philistia, Judah, Edom, Moab and those who live on islands and bring tribute...they sent countless evil lies to alienate (them) from me, and sent bribes to Pir'u, king of Musru..." While Judah did not rebel, it is listed with the areas in the south and east such as Philistia and Edom, not with the north and with Israel. Neither inscription associates Judah in any way with Samaria/Bit Omri/Israel.

Judah is referred to by the subsequent Assyrian kings in association with the southern states of Philistia, Edom, and Moab. Since Samaria/Bit Omri/Israel was destroyed, it is not surprising that the Assyrians do not discuss them further. Thus, the later references to Judah shed no further light on the relationship between the two in the eyes of the Assyrians.

DELINEATING A COMPARISON

A review of the Assyrian sources reveals that they saw no special connection between Israel and Judah. The Assyrians group the two entities with different cities, campaigns and situations. This comparison of the biblical text with the Assyrian accounts reveals that they differ most significantly around issues concerning who instigated revolts and the entry of Assyria into the region.

The main question is why the Assyrians would not reveal a special connection between the two when the Bible does? It is difficult to believe that the Assyrians did not know about the relationship, since they were engaged in the area for more than 130 years before the destruction of Israel. They knew about internal revolts of the



TOP: Map of the first millennium Ancient Near East showing the "lost 10 tribes." River Habor, Gozan, and Medes are highlighted. There is no scholarly consensus as to the location of Halah; BOTTOM: Map of Israel, Judah, and their contemporaries

subject groups and what states were working together against them. It is hard to imagine why they would try to avoid revealing a relationship between the two. The Assyrians infer a relationship between Israel/Bit Omri and the Aramaeans, and between Judah and the southern states. The other entities in the region opposed Assyria with Israel, so why show those relationships and not one with Judah?


A more shocking but probably better explanation may be that there was no special relationship between Israel and Judah, or that the relationship recorded in the Bible is more theological and ideological than historical and was thus not discernible from the outside. This option demands a more thorough investigation into the nature of the relationship between Israel and Judah using archaeology, the Bible and other, extra-biblical, texts. A ninth-century-B.C. inscription discovered at Tel Dan in Israel in 1993 contains a reference to Bit David (the house of David). The problem is that the context of

the reference within the inscription is unclear because of breaks in the text. The inscription seems to indicate that the House of David (not Judah) was connected with Israel at some point.

With the growing body of nonbiblical historical texts, such as the Assyrian cuneiform tablets, there is scholarly consensus that not all biblical statements are grounded in history. Scholars are already questioning the relationship between Israel and Judah through internal biblical evidence. Some posit that Israel and Judah were not joined until after the exile of the north as part



WILLIAM H. KRIEGER

of Hezekiah's attempt to bring the northern remnant under his control. The Assyrian material, as indicated in this article, adds a perspective to the ongoing discussion. The Assyrians may have destroyed ancient Israel, but the records they left behind may be the very texts that allow us to better understand who the people of Samaria/Bit Omri/Israel were. 

AUTHOR'S NOTE

To understand how the Assyrians viewed the relationship between Israel and Judah, I have been scrutinizing the Assyrian cuneiform texts — something previously never done. I am investigating how they reported the relationship between Israel and Judah by reviewing, chronologically, references to Israel and Judah in the Assyrian inscriptions. The results should add to the discussion of when and how the concept of unity between Israel and Judah was established.

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Assyrian king Sargon II in a relief from Khorsabad



Schneider at work at Tel el-Far'ah



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