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The Rise and Fall of Ambaris: Assyrian Power Struggles on Tabal

Abstract

This study examines the strategies pursued by the Neo-Assyrian Empire during the reign of Sargon II (721–705 BCE) to establish control over Tabal, revealing the limits of imperial power and the political dynamics of the region. Assyrian King Sargon II initially pursued indirect strategies that emphasized diplomatic reconciliation, cooperation with local dynasties, and the preservation of local administrations. A notable example of this approach was Ambaris, who was descended from a local dynasty. Sargon II appointed Ambaris as king of Tabal, established a family bond by marrying him to his daughter Ahat-abisha, and strengthened this alliance by giving him the Hilakku lands as a dowry. However, according to Sargon's claim, when Ambaris formed an alliance with Phrygia and Urartu, Sargon abandoned diplomacy and went straight to direct military intervention, deposing Ambaris from the throne. This situation revealed the instability of the Assyrian vassal system, and due to its similarity to the conflicts the Hittites experienced with their vassals, as seen in the example of Madduwatta, highlighted the difficulties of indirect rule in Anatolia. The study examines Sargon's attempts to maintain his hegemony through alliances based on marriage and incentives such as land grants, as well as the measures he took when these rewards failed, such as exiling disloyal vassals and annexing their lands, and the various strategies he employed. Additionally, it highlights the geopolitical weaknesses of the Assyrian Empire in the buffer zones where it clashed with Phrygia and Urartu. Consequently, the competition over Tabal led to the death of Sargon II and triggered a crisis that intensified with the Cimmerian invasions. This study analyzes Assyrian imperial strategy and its consequences in Tabal through the rise and fall of Ambaris.

Keywords: Ambaris, Sargon II, Tabal, Assyria.

Ambaris'in Yükselişi ve Düşüşü: Tabal'da Asur'un İktidar Mücadeleleri

Öz

Bu çalışma, II. Sargon (MÖ 721–705) döneminde Yeni Asur İmparatorluğu'nun Tabal üzerinde kontrolü sağlamaya yönelik izlediği stratejileri inceleyerek imparatorluk gücünün sınırlarını ve bölgenin siyasi dinamiklerini ortaya koymaktadır. Asur Kralı II. Sargon başlangıçta diplomatik uzlaşma, yerel hanedanlarla iş birliği ve yerel yönetimlerin önemli bir yer tuttuğu dolaylı stratejiler izlemiştir. Bunun önemli örneklerinden biri, yerel hanedan soyundan gelen Ambaris'tir. II. Sargon, Ambaris'i Tabal kralı olarak atamış, ailevi bir bağ kurarak kızı Ahat-abisha ile evlendirmiş ve çeyiz olarak Hilakku topraklarının vererek bu ittifakı pekiştirmiştir. Ancak Sargon'un iddiasına göre Ambaris, Frigya ve Urartu ile ittifak kurunca Sargon diplomasiyi bir tarafa bırakarak doğrudan askerî müdahaleye yönelmiş, Ambaris'i tahttan indirmiştir. Bu durum ise Asur'un vasal sisteminin istikrarsızlığını gözler önüne sermekle beraber Hititlerin Madduwatta örneğinde görüldüğü gibi vasallarıyla yaşadığı çatışmalarla benzerliği nedeniyle Anadolu'da dolaylı yönetimin zorluklarını vurgulamaktadır. Çalışma, Sargon'un evlilik üzerine yaptığı ittifaklar, toprak bağışları gibi teşviklerle hegemonyasını sürdürmeye çalıştığını ancak bu ödüllerin başarısız olması üzerine sadakatsiz vasalları sürgüne gönderme ve topraklarını ilhak etme gibi önlemleri ve uyguladığı çeşitli stratejileri incelemektedir. Bunların yanı sıra Asur'un, Frigya ve Urartu ile çatıştığı tampon bölgelerde imparatorluğun jeopolitik zayıflıklarını da vurgulamaktadır. Sonuçta Tabal üzerindeki rekabet, II. Sargon'un ölümüne neden olmasının yanı sıra sonrasında Kimmer istilalarıyla daha da şiddetlenen bir krize yol açmıştır. Bu çalışma, Ambaris'in yükselişi ve düşüşü üzerinden Tabal üzerinde Asur imparatorluk stratejisini ve sonuçlarını analiz etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ambaris, II. Sargon, Tabal, Asur.

Introduction

When historians or researchers look at maps showing the widest borders of the states, they can see geography spread over vast areas. However, as researchers examine events carefully, they find that authority in some parts of these vast areas depicted on maps was either extremely fragile or harbored specific problems. A similar situation can be observed in the subject of this study. Despite the powerful image of the Assyrian state authority during the reign of Sargon II, one of the strongest periods of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, it can be seen that there were some problems in the southern parts of Anatolia. The focus of this study is the Tabal, which was of great importance to the Assyrian Empire in terms of geostrategy, economy, and politics. For this, Sargon II made great efforts to maintain control over the region through peaceful and military means. Even one of these attempts resulted in the death of this great emperor.

On the other hand, one of the significant events that inspired this study is the events that took place in the Hittite state and one of its vassals, namely Madduwatta, and events around this Hittite vassal. The Madduwatta events are significant for Hittite and Anatolian history because they revealed key aspects and flaws of Hittite imperial strategy. Focused on Syria and threats from the east, the Hittites adopted a covert approach, using vassals such as Madduwatta as a buffer rather than exercising direct control in Western Anatolia, leading to problems in the region. Madduwatta's challenge and expansion, taking advantage of Hittite "tolerance," demonstrated the risks of this policy, as local rulers were able to form independent power blocks. The text also highlights the early tensions with Ahhiyawa and the challenging nature of Western Anatolia, where shifting alliances and rebellions were very common. In conclusion, Madduwatta's story is reflected in historical records as someone who used the Hittites' policy to his advantage. However, in some respects, it is very important because it reveals the Hittites' politics, strategy, the role of local powers in governance, and the strategies they employed to maintain control of the region (Ünal, 2003, ss. 15-17; Bryce, 1986, pp. 1-9; Kosak, 1980, pp. 163-165; Kan & Dündar, 2005, ss. 1-9; Karauğuz, 2019, ss. 67-75). In this context, while there are many articles and publications on Madduwatta, the lack of studies on Ambaris, which experienced a similar historical process, and the scarcity of studies focusing on Ambaris and strategies of Assyrians to maintain their territories in Anatolia are among the motivations for this study. On the other hand, studies mostly focus on Assyria rather than Anatolia, another reason to discuss this event from another perspective.

Why is Ambaris, around whom the events during the reign of Sargon II and the conflicts between Assyria and Anatolia revolved, important, and why is he a figure that should be focused on in terms of Anatolian history? We can explain the answer to this question with several reasons. These reasons also aim to shed light on the areas this study focuses on.

The first reason is to analyze Assyria's strategies to establish its rule in Anatolia. Because the Assyrians tried many different strategies in the region, both through war and peace, they could still not fully control it. In order to shed light on this part, the theoretical dimension of the discussion in the first chapter of Niccolo Machiavelli's book, which was written almost twenty centuries later, *The Prince* (2019), entitled "How Many Kinds of Principalities There Are, And by What Means They Are Acquired," forms the basis of this study. In this chapter, Machiavelli discusses a region's inheritance-based and civil principalities and their advantages and disadvantages to the state. At this point, Ambaris' appointment to Tabal, or Bit Bīt-Brutash in Assyrian texts, will be examined within the framework of this theory; thus, how the Assyrians ruled their Anatolian vassals and what kind of strategies they employed will be revealed within the framework of a theory about the subsequent period. At this point, it will be discussed whether it was possible to establish hegemony in the region through military intervention alone. These main topics mentioned above, and especially the perspective that evaluates the discussion

from the perspective of Anatolian history rather than Assyrian history, constitute the original value of this study.

The second point to be discussed regarding the importance of Ambaris is what Assyria's policy was in the region and its effects on the region's later periods. While doing so, the general perspective will be Anatolia rather than Assyria, and an opinion will be put forward. In this context, Assyria generally replaced its extremely oppressive tendency to resolve problems with weapons with some different strategic elements, efficiently. At this point, the events in Ambaris and its surroundings are noteworthy from a strategic and political perspective.

The third critical point regarding the events around Ambaris and its surroundings is the extent of the intervention of the Urartu and Phrygian states in the region. This point is critical because it raises the question of whether Ambaris, which faced an enemy like Assyria, was under threat or whether it was a region where Assyria, even in one of its strongest periods, was unable to establish ultimate sovereignty, contrary to the claims of Assyrian kings. From this perspective, the events around Ambaris and its surroundings will be analyzed, and Assyria's provincial policy, or more accurately, the "limits of its power," will be discussed. So, the critical role played by "geopolitical dynamics" would be highlighted.

The study will follow the methodological steps used in history, namely scanning, classification, analysis, criticism, and synthesis. In particular, the sources provided by the Assyrian kings, especially texts belonging to Sargon II's reign in the RINAP (Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period) series regarding these events, will be examined within the framework of the perspectives provided by the aforementioned methodological elements.

Two elements define the scope of this study, the first of which is geography. The geography examined in this study is Proper Tabal, or as Sargon mentioned, Bīt-Brutash, which roughly bordered by Que and Hilakku in the south, Phrygia in the west, the Halys River in the north, and Gurgum, Kummuhu, Kammanu, and Urartu in the east (Elayi, 2017, p. 99). The period examined in the article is between 721 and 705 BCE, during the reign of Assyrian King Sargon.

The historical process of the events in Ambaris and its surroundings is of primary importance for understanding the study, and the information we have is mainly from the period of Sargon II (721-705 BC), during which the events took place. Understanding the broader context of Assyria's interaction with Anatolia around Ambaris is crucial for understanding Ambaris's position and the nature of Assyria's imperial expansion in this region.

The first stage in the historical process is integration; we do not have detailed information about his family and personal biography. However, Ambaris emerges as the ruler of Tabal or Bīt-Brutash, with uncertain borders (Melchert, 2023, p. 98), during the reign of Sargon II (721-705 BC). However, there is some information about how his family came to the throne.

Tabal King Wasusarma was considered himself as a "Great King" as a result of the successes achieved by in the region, and his attitude, which showed that he was equal in status to the Assyrian King, led to his kingdom being taken away from him (RINAP, Tiglath-pileser III, 47; Bryce, 2009, p. 864). This deposition presented an opportunity for Ambaris' father, Hulli, who was not of royal descent and was described in Assyrian texts as "the son of no one," to ascend the throne. At this point, the use of the term "Homo Novus," which was used in Rome to describe someone who had no family members in important positions before (Dillon & Garland, 2013, p. 455), can be mentioned as a common point in the political traditions of the Ancient World. However, based on historical records, it can be inferred that Hulli, the new king of Tabal, must have engaged in initiatives that Assyria disapproved of. Probably during the reign of Salmanasser V, he met the same fate as his predecessor, was deposed, and subsequently exiled to the Assyrian capital.

Map 1

The Kingdoms of Tabal and Hilakku
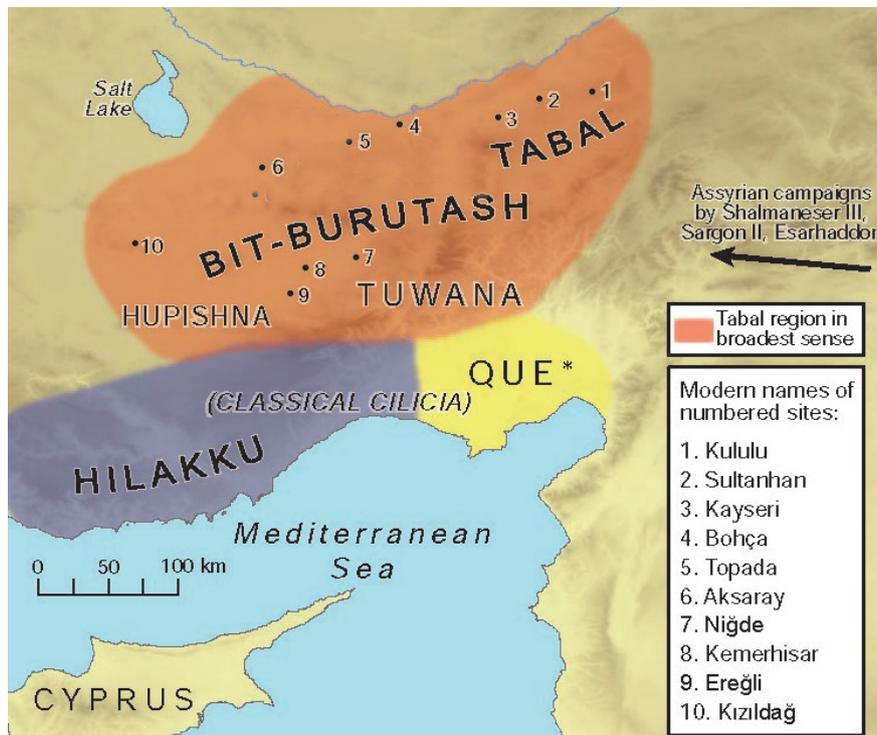
Source: (Bryce & Birkett-Rees, 2016, p. 164)

Following the death of Hulli, Ambaris' father, Sargon II placed Ambaris, who was in exile in the capital like his father, on the Tabal's throne at the beginning of his reign in approximately 721 BC (RINAP, Sargon II, 1, 194b). The Assyrian king saw this as an important strategic move. This act of appointing a ruler emphasized the significant Assyrian influence in the region and Sargon's desire to maintain control over his Anatolian territories. Seeking to establish permanent rule in the region, the Assyrian emperor sought to strengthen his relationship with his vassal and forge a powerful alliance by arranging a marriage between his daughter Ahat-abisha and Ambaris, thereby making Ambaris his son-in-law (RINAP, Sargon II, 7, 29b). Such alliances formed through marriage were a standard diplomatic tool used by Assyrian kings to integrate local rulers into the broader Assyrian political structure and secure their loyalty (Shibata, 2015, pp. 235, 236).

This marriage was a political success for Sargon II, and royal inscriptions boast Ambaris' efforts to strengthen his position and expand his territory. He claimed to have "expanded his lands" under Ambaris' rule. Furthermore, it is reported that Sargon gave Ambaris the country of Hilakku, located on the southern coast of Anatolia, as part of Ahat-abisha's dowry (Elayi, 2017, p. 232). The name Bit-Bruthas probably refers to the southward expansion of the original kingdom of northern Tabal (Tabal Proper), possibly reaching the northern borders of Hilakku and possibly extending as far as the modern Konya region (Bryce, 2005, p. 144; Gökçek & İnce, 2016, s. 900). This expansion, whether fully realized or merely claimed, indicates Sargon's intention to strengthen Ambaris as a reliable vassal capable of enforcing Assyrian influence over a larger portion of south-central Anatolia.

Despite Sargon II's claim to have given Hilakku to Ambaris as a dowry, it is important to note that this rugged and geographically challenging region on the southern coast of Anatolia remained largely independent from direct Assyrian control for much of the Neo-Assyrian period. Therefore, the effectiveness of Ambaris's control over Hilakku is debatable. Sargon's gift may

have been more of a symbolic gesture than a reflection of the power dynamics. The subsequent appointment of an Assyrian governor to Hilakku suggests an attempt to finally establish more direct influence over the region following Ambaris' removal from office. On the other hand, one specific archaeological evidence, such as a Luwian hieroglyphic inscription at Kızıldağ, provides further insight into the nature of Assyrian influence during this period. The inscription depicts a figure with hair and clothing displaying strong Assyrian stylistic elements. It has been suggested that this figure may be Ambaris and that he may have resided in Assyria as the king's "guest" before ascending the throne, leading to a period of Assyrian acculturation to some extent. This situation demonstrates that Assyrian cultural norms and visual representations began to penetrate the Anatolian elite and reflected the power dynamics of the period (Bryce, 2005, p. 145).

The second stage in the historical process is rebellion; the initial alliance and apparent goodwill between Sargon and his son-in-law Ambaris did not last long, and around 713 BCE, relations between Sargon II and Ambaris deteriorated significantly. Assyrian sources claim that Ambaris resorted to political initiatives against Assyria with local powers in his region, particularly Phrygia and Urartu. Phrygia, under kings such as Midas, had become a growing power in western Anatolia, and Urartu, despite the heavy defeat suffered by the Assyrians in the Battle of Waush and Sargon's as opposed to the claims in the document titled "Letter to the God Ashur," which states that the Urartians lost the material and moral power to rule the region, Urartu continued to be a constant rival to Assyria in the north and northeast. This situation left Ambaris trying to survive in a buffer zone between Phrygia, Urartu, and Assyria (Kravitz, 2003 pp. 81-98).

According to Assyrian documents, the claim that Ambaris was involved in anti-Assyrian plans directly threatened Sargon's attempts to establish hegemony over Anatolia, which is why he took action. Sargon took action and in 713 BC, the Assyrian army marched on Ambaris, brought the region under its control, and exiled the entire family and royal court members to Assyria. With the exile of Ambaris and his close associates, Assyrian indirect rule over Tabal effectively ended (RINAP, Sargon II 007; Toptaş, 2024, p. 71).

The next stage in the historical process was a revision process, and following the exile of Ambaris, Sargon II took action to establish direct Assyrian rule over Bīt-Brutash and Hilakku, appointing probably Ashur-sharru-usur, an Assyrian governor, as the regional authority based in Adanawa (probably modern Adana). Ashur-sharru-usur's jurisdiction encompassed both Hilakku and part of Bīt-Brutash, indicating the end of local dynastic rule in this region and its incorporation into the Assyrian provincial system. The transition from indirect rule through a vassal king to direct rule reflects Assyria's tightening control over strategic regions and its response to perceived disloyalty (Elayi, 2017, p. 256; Bryce, 2012, p. 158). The fate of Ambaris and his family after their deportation to Assyria is not clearly stated in the available sources. However, as was the case with other exiled elites, they were probably integrated into Assyrian society under supervision.

Their removal marked an important turning point in Tabal's history, ending local dynastic rule and ushering in a period of direct Assyrian rule. This event highlights the power and reach of the Neo-Assyrian Empire under Sargon II, its determination to intervene decisively in the affairs of its neighbors, and its strategy of maintaining control over its vast territories. The story of Ambaris serves as a case study of the complex interplay of alliance, dependency, and resistance that characterized Assyria's relations with the Anatolian kingdoms throughout the Iron Age. While Assyrian sources typically present a dominant narrative emphasizing Assyrian power and the treachery of those who resisted, the events surrounding Ambaris point to underlying tensions and constant power struggles in the ancient Near East.

1. Political and Military Elements Used by Assyria to Maintain Control over the Region

During the reign of Sargon II, Assyria's policy in the Tabal was characterized by a fluctuating approach that evolved from establishing vassal relationships to direct annexation, driven by strategic concerns, economic interests, and the influence of the changing political environment in Anatolia (SAA, 05, 255). Before Sargon II, Assyria's intervention in Tabal was limited, with only mention of Tabal rulers paying tribute during the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 BCE). However, Sargon II recognized the strategic importance of Tabal, which consisted of several small kingdoms bordering Phrygia and Urartu, both of which were located on the Anatolian plateau and posed a potential threat to Assyrian rule in the northwest. Sargon's initial policy was to encourage loyalty among the rulers of Tabal, even through diplomatic marriages, while defending Assyrian hegemony and ensuring that the region served as a buffer against the influence of Phrygia and Urartu. In this part, we will discuss what strategies were devised to achieve this political aim.

1.1. Buffer States and Indirect Strategy

Although it is known that campaigns were conducted in Tabal, one of the regions where Assyria intervened before Sargon II, during the reigns of Salmanassar III and Tiglath-Pileser III, it is understood that the region was not considered to have great strategic importance by these emperors. However, after Sargon acceded to the throne, this picture changed, and even the emperor's concerns regarding Tabal were not limited to politics and strategy. The region also had economic value; it possessed natural resources such as silver, limestone, and wood, which were particularly important for extensive construction projects, including Sargon's new capital. At this point, Sargon II focused on this region rather than allowing events to take their usual course (Kurt, 2010, s. 70; Elayi, 2017, p. 99; Pekşen, 2018, ss. 325-327).

When Sargon II's interventionist approach is analyzed strategically, it becomes clear that he sought to establish a dynasty loyal to Assyrian interests in Tabal and its surroundings, centered on Ambaris. Due to its strategic location, Tabal served multiple purposes beyond securing Assyria's northwestern side. The first was to act as a buffer zone, preventing the Phrygians from intervening in Assyrian territory and its allies. Additionally, a powerful Assyrian vassal in this region could protect other vassals and minimize Phrygian influence (Melville, 2010, p. 88; Bryce, 2012, p. 43; Elayi, 2017, p. 88). Thus, the Phrygians, who were inclined to interfere with Assyrian interests in the region constantly, would have to deal with a new Assyrian-backed power, and perhaps even an Assyrian-backed Tabal king could implement the new strategy against the Phrygians and neutralize them in their territories. Indeed, even after the direct annexation of some Tabal regions, Sargon continued to establish relations with other Tabal entities and implemented a "divide and conquer" strategy by distributing land and power among the remaining Tabal kings to prevent any state from becoming too powerful and potentially threatening Assyrian control (Elayi, 2017, p. 100). For example, Kiakki of Shinuhu was defeated for refusing to pay tribute and forming an alliance with Mita, and his city was handed over to Kurti of Atunna, a rival Tabal state. However, this strategy of manipulating local rivalries was not always successful, as Kurti later formed a temporary alliance with Mita (Ponchia & Lanfranchi, 2024, p. 198; Bryce, 2012, p. 146).

The second of these tasks was to create a geographical barrier between Urartu and the Phrygians, who were interfering in Assyria's sphere of influence, thereby severing both their physical and psychological ties, because Tabal was in a geography where two states meet. A strong Tabal was extremely important for Assyrian politics (Elayi, 2017, p. 100). In order to create this psychological barrier, rebels with ties to Phrygia were taken to the capital and replaced with new people who had no ties to Phrygia. Thus, the personal ties between the two allies who

had previously cooperated were severed. When we evaluate this situation in general, Assyria's possible expectations are to create a buffer zone between Assyria and the Phrygians and to end direct Phrygian intervention in its vassals. Another important goal may be to prevent the Phrygians and Urartians from forming an anti-Assyrian coalition by creating a geographical and political barrier between them.

1.2. Political Marriage and Integration with Local Dynasties

Sargon II's early approach to Tabal is evident in his relations with Hulli and his son Ambaris. Hulli had probably been deposed by Shalmaneser V and exiled to Assyria (Fuchs, 2017, p. 254). The Assyrians adopted a strategy of integration with the local dynasties, which involved holding future kings of the local dynasties as hostages in the Assyrian capital and their education according to Assyrian interests. Thus, a ruler with more in common with them, who was well acquainted with Assyrian power and culture, would be appointed. In line with this strategy, the Assyrian emperor cooperated with local dynasties to increase regional power (Toptaş, 2024, p. 70).

On the other hand, understanding Assyria's administrative approach and level of influence will make it easier to understand the issue. Assyria's influence on the region went beyond a mere political goal and sought to permeate the area culturally, with effects extending as far as Lydia and even Greece. For example, the cult of Kubaba of Carchemish was seen in Lydia, and luxury items such as parasols were among the evidence of Assyrian cultural expansion. (West 1997, p. 33; Parpola 2003, p. 102).

Sargon's strategies for the region signaled a new approach. The king of Assyria even gave this place a new name, and the term "land of Bīt-Brutash" is mainly used in Sargon's inscriptions, and its exact lands are unclear (Melchert, 2003, p. 98; Bryce, 2012, p. 297). Sargon, who was searching for new allies, following Hulli's death, to strengthen his position in the Tabal, consolidated his relationship by marrying his daughter Ahat-abisha to Hulli's son Ambaris and giving him the Hilakku lands as a dowry (Postgate, 1973, p. 31; Melville, 2010, p. 96). On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that the lands granted to local dynasties were, in a sense, part of a divide-and-rule strategy (Richardson, 2010, p. 96). The Tabal states were inclined to fight each other; this situation is more desirable than their unity from Assyria's perspective because it facilitated its regional objectives. (Elayi, 2017, p. 99) This was likely aimed at elevating Ambaris above the other vassal states in the region, and it indicates a policy of working with local rulers to establish stable, albeit dependent, leadership in the region. This strategic move underscores Sargon's attempt to secure Assyrian influence through family ties and create a powerful, pro-Assyrian presence within Tabal.

However, Sargon's policy of indirect control through his preferred vassals faced significant challenges due to the shifting allegiances of the Tabal kings. Neighbouring powers such as Phrygia under King Mita and Urartu often influenced it. King Mita of Phrygia frequently attempted to weaken Assyrian influence by forming alliances with Sargon's vassals and encouraging them to revolt. Despite his family ties to Sargon, Ambaris ultimately proved his disloyalty by allying with the Phrygian Mita, Urartu, and other Tabal kings to expel the Assyrians from the region (RINAP, Sargon II, 001; Baker, 2023, p. 376).

At this point, as mentioned in the introduction, it can be understood that, as expressed in Niccolo Machiavelli's theory (2019, p. 6), integration with local dynasties facilitated matters in some respects. However, the fundamental problem was that the appointed local dynasty member ruled the lands in his name rather than the Assyrian king's name, which became a significant problem. At this point, the problems faced by Assyria in the region followed a process parallel to Machiavelli's theory.

1.3. Balance Policy

Another important strategy employed by the Assyrian emperor Sargon in Tabal and the surrounding area was to divide and conquer, keeping the small city-states in constant conflict so that they would wear each other down. On the other hand, by intervening in local dynamics, he rewarded loyal rulers with the lands seized from rebels. By giving Ambaris both his daughter and Hilakku, he elevated him to a position of greater power than the others and established a balance of power according to his strategy (Postgate, 1973, p. 31; Melville, 2010, p. 96; Elayi, 2017, p. 99).

One example of this balance policy is the defeat of Kiakki of Shinuhta, who refused to pay tribute and formed an alliance with Mita, resulting in his city being handed over to Kurti of Atunna, a rival Tabal state. However, this strategy of manipulating local rivalries was not always successful, as Kurti later temporarily formed an alliance with Mita. One of the issues is that the Assyrian king was more interested in expanding his territory through his vassals rather than directly controlling the lands he had conquered. At this point, it is debatable how effective this political manoeuvre would be, as holding onto a region, even if it had been taken, is one of the factors that strain states both materially and morally. In this case, vassal states have an important role, especially since granting a vassal state a region that has not yet been taken is, in a sense, presenting something that does not exist as a great reward (Elayi, 2017, p. 205).

Information about the consequences of Sargon II's attempts to change the balance of power in the region in favour of his vassals is available indirectly. This move must have been one of the reasons for the constant rebellions in the region. On the other hand, if we consider this issue from the perspective of Tabal and its surroundings, the most important factor determining the political situation in the region is the power of the Assyrians, Urartians, and Mushki, as it is understood that the small states in the region took their positions according to this power distribution. However, this power distribution is likely the primary source of political instability in the region. Although we do not have written evidence, there is no evidence to refute the idea that the Phrygians and Urartians followed a similar strategy. In that case, the competition between small city-states is another factor, not just the influence of large states. This is because neighbouring cities turn to larger states for help when they fight each other. This attitude is like inviting the Assyrians, Phrygians, and Urartians to intervene in the region. This situation destabilises the region and causes chronic problems (Parpola and Watanabe 1988, p. xvi).

However, this complex political manipulation and strategy of establishing a balance between local powers ultimately proved insufficient. Despite being Sargon's son-in-law and favourite vassal, Ambaris of Tabal/Bit-Purutash conspired with the kings of Phrygia, Urartu, and other Tabal kings to oppose Assyrian rule. This betrayal led to a change in Sargon's policy. In 713 BCE, Sargon was forced to command his army in Tabal, defeat Ambaris, and exile him and his family to Assyria (Yiğit, 2000, s. 183; Akçay, 2014, s. 45). Following this, Sargon adopted a more direct control policy, annexed Tabal as an Assyrian province, appointed a provincial governor, and imposed Assyrian taxes.

1.4. Direct Intervention and the Region's Annexation to Assyria

The strategies employed by the Assyrians generally included propaganda, and it seems that the use of weapons was emphasized in order to highlight their power. However, as we have seen in the examples above, Sargon II was not someone who sought to resolve issues solely through the use of weapons, but it is clear that Sargon was aware that politics alone could not solve the problem either. Although he used strategy in the first place instead of weapons, he did not hesitate to resort to arms when this proved politics ineffective.

As recounted in the historical narrative, the unfolding events show that Sargon II prioritised politics, which was less costly and less risky, and appointed Ambaris, a vassal with

whom he had established a marriage alliance, to rule the region. However, the geopolitical dynamics of the region posed an obstacle to Sargon's long-term rule in the region, and his son-in-law and vassal, Ambaris, betrayed the Assyrian king, as the king himself put it, by collaborating with Assyria's enemies (Bryce, 2012, pp. 279-280).

This act, perceived as 'treason' by Sargon, demanded a strong response. In 713 BCE, Sargon II launched a military campaign against Tabal, decisively responding to Ambaris' betrayal. He deposed Ambaris and his family and exiled them to Assyria and this marked a significant shift in Sargon's policy toward Tabal, as he moved away from relying on local vassal kings and instead transformed Tabal (particularly Bit-Burutash and Hilakku) into an Assyrian province, imposing Assyrian administration and taxation. This direct annexation was seen as a 'last resort' when other strategies failed. Sargon's aim was to strengthen his dominance over the Anatolian kingdoms south of the Halys River and create a more secure defence against the ambitions of the Phrygians and Urartians (RINAP, Sargon II, 001; Melchert, 2003, pp. 99-100).

The complex and often treacherous political situation in Tabal required constant attention and intervention from Assyria. By maintaining control over key regions such as Tabal and Que (Adanawa), Sargon aimed to prevent communication and potential alliances between Phrygia and Urartu. Even after the annexation of Bīt-Brutash and Hilakku, the political landscape of Tabal remained volatile due to the continued resistance of figures such as Gurdi/Kurti against Assyrian rule in the Til Garimmu area. This ongoing instability likely contributed to Sargon II's decision to personally lead a campaign against Tabal in the final year of his reign, in 705 BCE. Tragically, Sargon II was killed during this campaign in Tabal, a rare fate for an Assyrian king in battle, highlighting the intensity and difficulty of maintaining control over the region. His death in Tabal signalled the temporary end of direct Assyrian authority in the area (Liverani, 2013, p. 491; Melville, 2016, pp. 187-190).

Machiavelli is not in favor of appointing local dynasties (Machiavelli, 2019, pp. 6-14). At this point, Asur is trying to solve the problem by abandoning the old approach and adopting a new perspective, direct control (Mansfield, 2001, p. 222). As Machiavelli also points out in his views, control by a central authority is preferable. However, several events have made it clear that Assyria initially opted for an indirect strategy and that this new approach failed to bring about absolute success.

In summary, Sargon II's policy in Tabal evolved from establishing and maintaining influence through local vassal rulers strengthened by strategic marriages to direct military intervention and annexation in response to widespread disloyalty and the strategic necessity of countering the ambitions of the Phrygians and Urartians. Economic interests in Tabal's resources and its important geographical position further motivated Assyrian intervention. Despite their efforts, continuing rebellions and Sargon's death in Tabal highlight the difficulties Assyria faced in tightly controlling this fragmented and strategically vital region of Anatolia. Although Sargon initially aimed for indirect rule, the complexity of Tabal politics and external pressures ultimately led to a more direct, but ultimately unsustainable, policy of provincialisation following his death.

2. Obstacles to Sargon II's Efforts to Establish Political Stability in the Region

Historically, vassals have acted according to the power status of the states they were affiliated with. Indeed, as Radner's (2012) study shows, the Assyrians also experienced serious problems in this respect and developed various political and military strategies to resolve them. One of the best examples of this is the case of the small states that sided with Urartu due to Assyria's loss of power, which later returned to Assyria after the great victory of Tiglath-Pileser III. Vassals, buffer states, or small states exerted great effort to survive political power fluctuations and always tried their best to side with the powerful. These efforts enabled them to continue their existence for centuries.

On the other hand, Assyria is just like other states; it is prone to power fluctuations, and internal problems led to its decline. This situation forces them to focus on internal affairs, pushing external enemies into the background and creating a unique opportunity for external enemies. The aforementioned power fluctuations generally stemmed from problems caused by internal struggles within the Assyrians. Frequent rebellions and struggles for the throne created great opportunities for these small states. This situation turned them into a group of 'allies' who formed alliances or distracted the state when it was strong and were ready to rebel when it was weak (Bryce, 2012, pp. 270-272).

At this point, despite its geographical distance from Tabal, some Babylonian rebellions during the Sargonid period can be cited as a striking example to explain this hypothesis. During the Assyrian dynasty, Marduk-apla-iddina II (Merodach-Baladan) rebelled, and Assyria could not control the region for a long time. He seized power in Babylon for such a long period (721-710 BC) that he was even recognised as a new dynasty in Babylon and resisted Sargon II (Melville, 2016, pp. 159-161). The second rebellion (703 BCE) briefly recaptured Babylon before being defeated by Sennacherib. In 703–702 BCE, Babylon rebelled again, and Sennacherib invaded Babylon and installed Bel-ibni as a puppet ruler. In the revolt of 700 BC, Bel-ibni, whom Sennacherib had recently appointed, was accused of treason. As a result, Sennacherib began to rule Babylon directly without appointing a new king to Assyria (Grasyon, 2000, p. 77). However, this situation did not resolve the issue, and in the 694-689 BC Revolt, Babylon rebelled again by forming an alliance with Elam against Assyria. Sennacherib retaliated by plundering Babylon (689 BC), destroying its temples, and exiling its people. The Revolt under Shamash-shum-ukin (652-648 BCE) - Sennacherib's son Esarhaddon rebuilt Babylon, but his brother Shamash-shum-ukin (king of Babylon) rebelled against Ashurbanipal. The Great Rebellion (652–648 BCE) ended with the brutal suppression of Babylon. The final rebellion of Babylon dealt a heavy blow to Assyria (626–620 BCE). After the death of Ashurbanipal, Nabopolassar led a successful rebellion that led to the fall of Assyria (609 BCE) (Frahm, 2017, p. 192; Gallagher, 2023, pp. 78-80).

The examples from Babylon provide important insights into the events in Tabal and the surrounding region. The first is that these rebellions had a serious sociological foundation, making it impossible to explain why they continued to rebel despite their defeat. Furthermore, constructing a comprehensive theory is extremely difficult because historical documents ignore sociological factors. Looking at specific historical events solely from a material stance makes it impossible to analyse them from a broader perspective. As a result, there must have been a spiritual force that triggered these rebellions, and the rebellions of Babylon and Tabal can be evaluated within the framework of three main factors.

The first of these factors can be interpreted as the fact that both regions had a large hinterland and a sustainable economy, and that the invasions they experienced did not ultimately break their power.

Another important factor must be a situation not reflected in historical documents, such as strong prejudice or hatred against the Assyrian administration. The loss of people, material possessions, and heavy penalties in wars caused the Tabal people, like the Babylonians, to gather strong supporters every time they rebelled. Diakonoff expressed this as "Hatred of Assyria being stronger than fear" (Diakonoff, 1985, p. 60), and this situation is the most important indicator of this society's readiness.

Throughout history, almost all states have experienced fluctuations in power, which some vassals have seen as an excellent opportunity to break away from the hegemony of an imperialist state. When a rebellion, war, or social event arose that would distract the great state, they tried to turn the crisis it created into an opportunity. This situation meant that Assyria had to intervene

repeatedly, wage wars, suffer economic losses, and incur significant military casualties, as seen in the examples of Babylon and Tabal.

Geopolitical and geostrategic dynamics are the other important elements for the limits of Assyrian power in the Tabal and vicinity. The most important forces influencing Sargon II's policy towards Tabal and its surroundings were Phrygia and Urartu, and their negative impact on the region significantly shaped regional politics. The expansion strategy of the Phrygian Mita and Urartu west of the Euphrates River posed a serious threat to Assyria's northwestern borders, so maintaining control over Tabal and Que to prevent a Phrygian-Urartu alliance was a priority for Sargon (RINAP, Tiglath-pileser III, 35; RINAP, Sargon II, 001; Bryce 2012, p. 49-53). Mita of Phrygia actively weakened Assyrian control by forming alliances with small states in the east of his kingdom and encouraging them to rebel against Assyria, creating a buffer zone that required Sargon to intervene against these allies, including those in Tabal (Elayi, 2017, p. 88; Healy, 2023, p. 92). Despite Assyria's harsh responses, Mita repeatedly succeeded in winning over Sargon's vassals and allies. For example, in 718 BCE, the king of Šinuhtu was punished for seeking refuge with Mita, and in 713 BCE, Ambaris of Tabal, whom Sargon had initially favoured, was deposed for the same reason (Yıldırım, 2022, ss. 475- 476).

Furthermore, in 712 BCE, Mita thwarted Sargon's plan to re-establish Tabal as an Assyrian province and even won over the king of Meliddu, another Assyrian vassal. Similarly, Urartu actively supported anti-Assyrian coalitions and encouraged local rulers to rebel against Assyrian influence. Tabal's Ambaris challenged Sargon's authority in Tabal by allying with the Urartian Rusa and the Phrygian Midas to expel the Assyrians from the region. This alliance, combined with the constant threat of expansion by Phrygia and Urartu and their efforts to win over Assyrian vassals, forced Sargon to increasingly interfere in the affairs of Tabal and the surrounding Neo-Hittite states. Sargon's response initially involved a 'divide and conquer' strategy, favouring Bīt-Brutash against rival Tabal states. He also frequently appointed and removed rulers in Tabal; for example, he reinstated Hulli and later his son Ambaris but removed Ambaris after he proved his disloyalty by allying with Phrygia and Urartu (Hawkins, 2000, pp. 41-43; Melchert, 2003, p. 99; Duymuş, 2011, p. 41; Şahin, 2019, s. 135).

Ultimately, ongoing rebellions and the failure of his political manoeuvres led Sargon to annex Tabal as an Assyrian province in 713 BCE. Sargon's concern over Tabal's strategic importance, which controlled the roads through the Cilician Gates and prevented easy communication between Phrygia and Urartu, further shaped his policies, even leading to direct military intervention and the fortification of strategic locations such as Til-Garimmu. Despite these efforts, the instability fuelled by the ambitions of the Phrygians and Urartians reached its peak with Sargon's final campaign against Tabal in 705 BCE, in which he was killed, and direct Assyrian authority in the region came to an end for a time (Melville, 2016, p. 287; Elayi 2017, p. 103; Frahm, 2023, p. 178; Ponchia & Lanfranchi, 2024, p. 238).

On the other hand, the Battle of Waush is particularly significant in demonstrating the extent of the Urartians' intervention in the region and their support for their allies. Despite suffering a heavy defeat at the hands of the Cimmerians, the Urartian army still sided with its ally, even though the Urartian King I. Rusa was defeated and lost attempting to help Mittati of Zikirtu, who was under pressure by the Assyrians (Çilingiroğlu, 1997; Kravitz, 2003; Grekyan, 2010; Dezsö, 2021). This situation shows that if the Urartians were willing to risk another heavy defeat on the battlefield for their allies even after suffering a heavy defeat, this could be interpreted as them pursuing a relentless and uncompromising strategy. On the other hand, another critical piece of information is that even after the Cimmerians defeated Urartu, the powerful Assyrian king did not go directly against Urartu but against his vassal in the east, which shows that Urartu was still powerful despite a heavy defeat. Another important point regarding

the text is that, despite containing propaganda suggesting that the Urartians lost their status as a kingdom as a result of losing their sacred city of Musashir, in the text, which focuses more on the victory over the Urartians than on the war itself, shows that the influence of the Urartians continued (Kravitz 2003).

When we evaluate the strategy of the reign of Sargon II in terms of Assyria's power limits, internal factors such as the difficult geography and significant distance, as well as political, cultural and political obstacles such as the Euphrates River, and the constant intervention of the Phrygians and Urartians in the region made it difficult for Assyria to control the region. At this point, the fact that Sargon II's son could only launch a campaign of revenge against the region ten years after his father's death shows that the cities and kingdoms in the region took advantage of Assyria's weakness without wasting any time. At the same time, Assyria's response was delayed for years, which encouraged these small kingdoms to rebel and gain their independence.

Conclusion

Assyrian king Sargon II implemented political and military strategies that profoundly impacted Anatolia and its surroundings, shaping the region's history. When we look at the events that Ambaris caused in Tabal, we see that the Assyrians were a powerful force in the region, with almost absolute power to appoint or remove whomever they wanted from the throne. The events in Ambaris and its surroundings are important in this regard. Although it is clear from the frequent rebellions that the Assyrians' extremely interventionist attitude was not widely approved in the region, it is surprising that this state, which had almost absolute power, was unable to establish a stable order in the region, which also shows the influence of local elements.

When examining the events in Ambaris and its surroundings, the first conclusion is that Sargon II was not merely a bloodthirsty warrior who relied solely on force, but rather a brilliant strategist who employed cunning tactics. Sargon attempted to resolve the issues in Ambaris peacefully before resorting to other methods. These strategies demonstrate that Sargon II was a politician who sought to achieve his goals through peace rather than force.

Another point worth noting is the propaganda element in Assyrian sources. The Assyrian sources in our possession mention that the local kings in the region were constantly rebelling. However, the absence of any documents left by the opposing side regarding the incident makes the situation somewhat suspicious. For example, in the document entitled 'Letter to the God Ashur' or 'Sargon's Eighth Campaign,' which provides information about the Battle of Waush, Sargon II focuses more on reasons such as the loss of Musashir by the Urartians, which led to the loss of their status as a kingdom, rather than the battle itself. However, when discussing the events in Tabal, it is mentioned that when Sargon II launched a campaign against Ambaris and other kings, no support came from Phrygia or Urartu. However, the fact that the Urartians fought against the Assyrian army at Waush to support Mittati of Zikirtu immediately after their heavy defeat against the Cimmerians suggests that these "rebels" should be questioned because it is suspicious that none of their allies sent any support.

Sargon's influence prevented the union of Phrygia and Urartu through Tabal, and either state could unite against the Assyrian or the Cimmerian threat. Additionally, the Urartians' defeats at the hands of the Cimmerians and then Sargon led the state into a significant military and political decline. Sargon II dealt a heavy blow to the Urartians, preventing them from forming an anti-Assyrian coalition with Phrygia in Tabal. He also prevented the two states from uniting against the Cimmerian threat, causing both states to suffer significant damage at the hands of the Cimmerians and influencing the course of Anatolian history.

When we evaluate the findings of this study from the perspective of Machiavelli's theory, we see that Sargon II tried both the local dynasty and the 'mixed principality' methods, but both

failed. One of the points that this study draws attention to is that a constructed political theory cannot be applied everywhere.

Another important finding of the study is that the failure of the mighty Assyrians, who tried almost all strategies, cannot be explained by the available historical information. Despite all precautions, Sargon's indirect and direct control over Tabal failed in the long run. In 705 BCE, a rebellion prompted Sargon to lead a military campaign against Tabal, which ended in a significant defeat for the Assyrians and the death of Sargon himself. This loss represented a significant setback in Sargon's efforts to subjugate Tabal permanently. Following Sargon's death, the withdrawal of Assyrian authority, combined with the growing threat of the Cimmerians and the decline of Urartu and Phrygia, led to the isolation of the Tabal states and ultimately to their regaining their autonomy.

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