

The Assyrian Impact on Urartu: Toponyms and Ideological Motifs

Zozan TARHAN¹

Abstract. *The main element of the Assyrian culture that Urartu adopted was the Neo-Assyrian cuneiform writing system. Along with the writing system various aspects of Assyrian culture were taken over as well. The Urartian royal titulary and epithets, both of which were strongly connected to the royal ideology, were taken over from the Assyrians. Aside from them, other ideological motifs were borrowed as well. The present paper investigates the Assyrian patterns and ideological motifs, which were adopted and adapted in Urartian royal inscriptions. Additionally it discusses the toponyms Nai'ri, Urartu and Bia (the latter often referred to as Biainili in modern studies) in the Assyrian and Urartian sources, the relationship between these toponyms, and their development over time.*

Rezumat. *Principala element al culturii asiriene pe care Urartu l-a adoptat a fost sistemul de scriere cuneiform neoasirian. Împreună cu sistemul de scriere au fost preluate și diverse aspecte ale culturii asiriene. Titulatura și epitetele regale urartiene, ambele strâns legate de ideologia regală, au fost preluate de la asirieni. În afară de acestea, au fost împrumutate și alte motive ideologice. Lucrarea de față investighează modelele și motivele ideologice asiriene, care au fost adoptate și adaptate în inscripțiile regale urartiene. În plus, se discută toponimele Nai'ri, Urartu și Bia (acesta din urmă adesea denumit Biainili în studiile moderne) în sursele asiriene și urartiene, relația dintre aceste toponime și dezvoltarea lor în timp.*

Keywords: Neo-Assyrian Empire; Urartu; Assyrian patterns, Assyrian royal ideology; ideological motifs; toponyms; spatial perceptions.

Introduction

The rise of the Urartian kingdom is closely connected to Assyrian intervention in this area. Especially the campaigns of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 B.C.) had a lasting effect on Urartian history – they lead to the emergence of the Urartian state.² As a response to the Assyrian challenge, the tribal units of the land Na'iri were united under one ruler.³ This major change regarding the political organisation of Urartu was evident from the very beginning of the reign of Shalmaneser III (858–824 B.C.). During his reign the first known Urartian ruler, Aramu, was mentioned. Aramu (ca. 859/858–844 B.C.) seems to have gained his fame by uniting the tribes under his sceptre and ruling from a capital city as in a centralised state. Despite his successes and efforts, the young state did not have royal inscriptions celebrating the king's deeds. The

¹ Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Faculty of History; Zozan.Tarhan@uni-sofia.bg; ORCID 0000-0002-7772-4977

² For more on the history and culture of Urartu, see SALVINI 1995.

³ See ZIMANSKY 1985, 117, 157.

first royal inscriptions came to the reign of the Sarduri I (ca. 840–830 B.C.),⁴ and during his reign we can observe the rise of Urartian power. During Sarduri's reign, one of the characteristic elements of the Assyrian culture was adopted – the cuneiform writing system.⁵ His inscriptions were written in Akkadian language.

Under the next Urartian ruler – Išpuini (ca. 830–820 B.C.) – the cuneiform writing system was already adapted to write the Urartian language. In addition, bilingual inscriptions in Urartian and Akkadian appeared. It is necessary to note that a high level of education and knowledge in the field of the Akkadian language and cuneiform signs is required to adopt them, especially when adapting the cuneiform system, which was optimised for Akkadian, to the Urartian language, which was of a quite different character.⁶ With the development of Urartian kingship, a royal ideology and specific terms related to the exercise of power were inevitably needed. In such a situation, the most common practice is to borrow such elements from the powerful neighbours, as it was the case with Urartu and Assyria, which I will demonstrate below.

Spatial Perceptions of the Toponyms Na'iri, Urartu and Bia in the Assyrian Sources

The earliest relevant mentioning of toponyms relating to the region is KUR *ú-ru-aṭ-ri* – “the land Uruaṭru” – attested during the reign of Shalmaneser I (1263–1234 B.C.).⁷ Later, during the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I, ANA *pa-aṭ na-i-ri* – “to the border of Na'iri” – and during the reign of Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076 B.C.), KUR.KUR *na-i-ri* – “the lands Na'iri” – are mentioned.⁸ Interestingly, other lands are mentioned as being within the land of the Uruaṭri people, which would mean that the Assyrians were referring to a territory inhabited by the Uruaṭri rather than to a territorial state; however, some of these lands are also present in the sources as part of the lands Na'iri. Because of these connections, modern scholars argue that when Assyrians spoke of Na'iri and the land of the Uruaṭri people in the Middle Assyrian period, they meant the same land, and they continued to use the toponyms Na'iri and Urartu synonymously during the Neo-Assyrian period.⁹ As additional or essential evidence for this researchers see the Neo-Assyrian sources. Often in such discussions is said that the toponym associated with Na'iri is attested, after a long gap, again under Adad-nērārī II, and the toponym Urartu – under Ashunarsirpal II, since the latter king refers to both toponyms in his royal inscriptions in close

⁴ The regnal years of the Urartian kings are according to the chronology argued by M. Salvini. For the regnal years of this and the next Urartian kings, see SALVINI 2011, 98–99.

⁵ See additionally SALVINI 2014.

⁶ See WILHELM 2008 for an introduction to Urartian.

⁷ RIMA 1, A.0.77.1: 27.

⁸ RIMA 1, A.0.78.1: IV 10; RIMA 2, A.0.87.1: IV 49.

⁹ For more information, see SALVINI 1967, 41–62; PIOTROVSKIY 1959, 44–46; BARNETT 1982, 329–331.

connections, especially with regard to his military campaigns. To be more precise, I would add that the toponym Uraṭru was documented in the royal inscriptions of Adad-nērārī II.¹⁰

I am convinced that there is an essential relationship between these toponyms, but that they were not used as absolute synonyms (at least not until the end of Ashurnasirpal II's reign). Based on textual sources and detailed analysis, I will argue below that the Assyrians perception of Na'iri and Uraṭru changed over time. Taking into account the sources, I assume that until the end of Ashurnasirpal II's reign, the Assyrians viewed Na'iri as a geographical area with an undetermined number of chiefdoms, one of which was Uraṭru. One should point out that in all of the royal inscriptions of Ashurnasirpal II "the land Na'iri" does not occur in the singular; all instances speak about "the lands Na'iri" in the plural. Accordingly, I imply that Assyrians used the toponym Uraṭru to describe specifically one of the political structures in the lands Na'iri. In one inscription of Ashurnasirpal II both toponyms are attested – "the lands Na'iri" and "the land Uraṭru":¹¹

When (the god) Aššur, the lord who called me by name (and) made my kingship supreme, placed his merciless weapon in my lordly arms, I struck down the extensive troops of the Lullumê in battle with the sword. With the support of the gods Šamaš and Adad, the gods my supporters, I thundered like the god Adad, the devastator, against the troops of the lands Na'iri, Ḫabḫu, Šubarû, and Nirbu. The king who made (the territory stretching) from the opposite bank of the Tigris River to Mount Lebanon and the Great Sea, land Lāqê in its entirety, (and) the land Sūḫu, including the city Rapiqu, bow down at his feet; he conquered from the source of the Subnat River to the land Uraṭru.

After the reign of Ashurnasirpal II, nevertheless, Na'iri was no longer spoken of as lands (pl.) but as a land (singular). I would suggest that during the reign of Ashurnasirpal II, Uraṭru was an emerging state, and after his reign, Uraṭru took precedence over some political structures in Na'iri. This led to the emergence of a territorial state, called Uraṭru and Na'iri in the Assyrian sources.¹²

Ashurnasirpal II's campaign against the lands Na'iri, which included the increasingly powerful future territorial state of Uraṭru, was successful from a military point of view. The fact that the Assyrians knew the routes to the north, which were studied much earlier during the campaigns of the Middle Assyrian kings and again at the beginning of the early Neo-Assyrian period, as well as the fact that they faced tribal units that were not in one alliance, are

¹⁰ RIMA 2, A.0.99.2: 25; RIMA 2, A.0.99.4: 16'.

¹¹ RIMA 2, A.0.101.2: 7–13.

¹² In the historiography, three stages of development of the Uraṭrian statehood are suggested: 1) tribal units; 2) transition from tribal unions to a territorial state in the 10th–9th centuries BC; 3) Uraṭru as an empire from the end of the 9th century BC. Arguments for this periodisation include both other sources and elements of the discussion offered here. For more information, see ZIMANSKY 1985, 48–61, 78–95.

among the reasons for Ashurnasirpal II's victories. As a result, he managed to permanently subdue many territories of the lands Na'iri. The establishment of the Assyrian base in the north of Tušḫa gave him easier access to both the regions north and northwest of Assyria. However, his expansion caused a strong effect on Urartian history. P. Zimansky explained the emergence of the Urartian state as a response to the challenge of the Assyrian campaigns in the lands of Na'iri. These campaigns led to the consolidation of tribal units under one ruler.¹³ This process of political consolidation of Urartu is evident from the very beginning of the reign of Shalmaneser III whose inscriptions announced the first Urartian king – Aramu (Arramu).

Despite the many campaigns against Urartu during the reign of Shalmaneser III, the result sought by Assyria, namely the conquest of this region, was not fully achieved. In the context of these campaigns, the battle of Sugunia took place at the very beginning of the reign, as well as the attack on the Urartian capital Aršašku in 856 B.C.¹⁴ The Neo-Assyrian sources do not mention that the Urartian rulers recognised the Assyrian kings as their suzerains. Even in a situation where the Assyrians overwhelmed them in a battle, the Urartian kings did not bend their knee, but preferred to resist with all possible forces, such as the escape of Aramu (Arramu) and the movement of the battle to the mountain. There is a vague reference to a tribute sent by Na'iri, but it is not specified what it consists of. It is notable that precious and raw materials are listed only when they came with a military victory. It may be argued that the Empire imposed some kind of vassal status on only part of the Urartian territories.

One can observe another change regarding the Assyrian conceptualisation of the toponym Na'iri. Because of a massive rebellion, Šamši-Adad V (823 – 811 B.C.) was not able to launch military campaigns in the beginning of his reign, by 820 B.C. that had changed.¹⁵ In this year, Assyria even directed two campaigns against Na'iri.¹⁶ The first was led personally by Šamši-Adad V and was aimed at Na'iri; it had a rather supervisory character. Due to the very recent suppression of the rebellion and the resulting instability, Šamši-Adad V could not conduct a military campaign of conquest, so he entrusted it to his eunuch Mutarriṣ-Aššur. As a result of the second campaign, the territories of Šaršina and Ušpina, which are reported as part of Na'iri, were subordinated.¹⁷ On his return from the second campaign, the royal official entered a battle with “the people of the land Sunbu”, which ended successfully for Assyria.¹⁸ For both campaigns, the king announced that tribute of teams of horses from “all of the kings of the land

¹³ ZIMANSKY 1985, 48–50.


¹⁴ RIMA 3, A.O.102.1: 29–33; TARHAN 2022, 123–124. Additionally on these and the further development of the relations between Assyria and Urartu, see RADNER 2021, 378–393.

¹⁵ For more on that, see TARHAN 2022, 161–164.

¹⁶ TARHAN 2022, 164.

¹⁷ RIMA 3, A.O.103.1: II 21–26.

¹⁸ RIMA 3, A.O.103.1: II 30–31.

Na'iri" was received.¹⁹ I would argue that we encounter an additional, new meaning of the toponym Na'iri in the inscriptions of Šamši-Adad V.²⁰ Evidently Na'iri does not refer to "the lands Na'iri" in his texts because the form is in the singular, but at the same time "all of the kings" are mentioned. Therefore, I assume that in this case the land Urarṭu is not expressly referred to, nor is the old sense of Na'iri implied, but rather the "the region Na'iri". The cuneiform sign  (KUR = *mātu*) can refer to a land (in the sense of a state), but also to a region.²¹ I believe that the case here is analogous to that of Ḫanigalbat and Ḫatti, which were toponyms used by the Assyrians after the collapse of Mittani (Ḫanigalbat) and the Neo-Hittite Kingdom (Ḫatti) to designate a specific region rather than the former political formations.²² Therefore, the foundations of the administrating this area were laid in the time of Shalmaneser III and later Šamši-Adad V fully exercised his control.

The Toponyms Na'iri, Urarṭu and Bia in the Urarṭian Royal Inscriptions

There should be no doubt that from the reign of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III onwards the Assyrian toponyms Na'iri and Urarṭu, as well as the Urarṭian one Bia, had the same meaning (although Bia was still not evident in texts due to the later emergence of the inscriptions compiled in Urarṭian). The state formation of Urarṭu gave rise to the emergence of the Urarṭian royal inscriptions. As already mentioned, the first inscriptions emerged under the Urarṭian ruler Sarduri I (ca. 840–830 B.C.). His inscriptions were compiled in Akkadian, and the Urarṭian ruler was referred to as "*king of Na'iri*".²³

Under the next Urarṭian ruler – Išpuini (ca. 830–820 B.C.) – the cuneiform writing system was already adapted to the Urarṭian language. This is evidenced by the bilingual inscription of the kings Išpuini (contemporary of Šamši-Adad V) and Menua (810–781 B.C.) from Kelishin.²⁴ The inscriptions was divided in two parts – Urarṭian and Akkadian. In the Urarṭian version Menua and Išpuini were defined as kings of Bia, as in the Akkadian one – as kings of Na'iri.

However, the common opinion exists among modern scholars that the Urarṭian rulers did not described their land as Urarṭu, but as Na'iri in their royal inscriptions compiled in Akkadian, and as "Biainili" (i.e. Bia) in those inscriptions written in Urarṭian. Nevertheless, the Assyrian name Urarṭu was borrowed as well and it was attested in two of the royal inscriptions of Rusa I that were written in Urarṭian.²⁵

¹⁹ RIMA 3, A.O.103.1: I 53–54; RIMA 3, A.O.103.1: II 32–34: "He received a payment of teams of horses from all of the kings of the land Na'iri".

²⁰ TARHAN 2022, 162.

²¹ BORGER 2010, 372–373, n. 578.

²² TARHAN 2022, 63, 106.

²³ A 1A–1F: 2 (CTU I: 97–99).

²⁴ For more details about that, see CTU I: 141–144. For the co-regency of Išpuini and Menua – PIOTROVSKIY 1959, 61–65.

²⁵ The Mowana Inscriptions – A 10–3: 56, CTU I: 501–502. The Topzawa Inscription – A 10–5: 26, CTU I: 507–508.

Assyrian Patterns and Ideological Motifs in the Urartian Royal Inscriptions

By introducing the cuneiform writing system, some Assyrian patterns were taken over as well. The Urartian royal titulary and epithets, both of which were strongly connected to the royal ideology, were taken over from the Assyrians.²⁶ Besides them, other ideological motifs were borrowed as well. A comparison between an inscriptions of Sarduri I, preserved in six duplicates from Van, and one of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 B.C.), evidences the similarities in the titulary:

^{md}sar₅-BĀD A ^mlu-ti-ip-ri MAN GAL-u!(e) MAN dan-nu MAN ŠÚ MAN KUR
na-i-ri

Sarduri mār Lutipri šarru rabû šarru dannu šar kiššati šar māt Na'iri

*Inscription of Sarduri, son of Lutipri, great king, strong king, king of the universe,
king of the land Na'iri...*²⁷

The so-called *Annals of Ashurnasirpal II* mentions the following:

Aššur-nāšir-aqli šarru rabû šarru dannu šar kiššati šar māt Aššur mār Tukultī-Ninurta

*Ashurnasirpal, great king, strong king, king of the universe, king of the land
Assyria, son of Tukultī-Ninurta...*²⁸

The similarity is more than obvious. This example clearly evidences the takeover of the Assyrian royal titles and epithets. This conclusion is not valid only regarding the specific inscription discussed here or other ones compiled in Akkadian, but such Assyrian patterns and motifs were introduced in the inscriptions written in Urartian language as well.

The Urartian rulers incorporated into their inscriptions another very important aspect of the Assyrian royal ideology, namely the role of the supreme god in kingship. In Assyria this was the god Aššur,²⁹ and in Urartu this was the god Ḫaldi.³⁰ To consider more deeply I would present the following examples. In the aforementioned inscription of Ashurnasirpal II we read:

*Ashurnasirpal... valiant man who acts with the support of Aššur, his lord, and has
no rival among the rulers of the four quarters, marvellous shepherd, fearless in
battle...*³¹

In an inscription of Rusa I (ca. 730–713 B.C.), discovered near Topzawa, we can find a very similar formulation:

²⁶ For more on the characteristics and functions of the royal titles and epithets, see SEUX 1967, 11–17. For more on the Assyrian titles and epithets, especially during the time of Tukultī-Ninurta I, see SAZONOV 2016, 19–109.

²⁷ CTU I A 1A-1F: 1–2.

²⁸ RIMA 2, A.O.101.1: II 125.

²⁹ MENZEL 1981, 36; HOLLOWAY 2002, XV, 65.

³⁰ PIOTROVSKIY 1959, 50; SALVINI 1995, 183.

³¹ RIMA 2, A.O.101.1: I 9, 12–13.

... I am Rusa, servant of the god Ḫaldi, faithful shepherd of the people, the one who approaches the temple of the god Ḫaldi, fearless in battle.³²

The great similarity between these textual accounts cannot be denied. In their royal inscriptions, the Assyrian kings emphasised their connection with the supreme god Aššur, by whom and the other great gods they were chosen, supported in battles and other deeds, which ensured their success.³³ This aspect of Assyrian ideology was also adopted by the Urartian rulers.

While Rusa is mentioned as a servant of Ḫaldi, Aššur is called Ashurnasirpal's lord, what is a formulation of the same sense in a different way. Both kings were considered to be guided by their supreme gods, who made them fearless – a quality seemingly needed to be faithful or marvellous shepherds of their peoples. It is also interesting to note that while the relationship between the king and the supreme god in Urartu is attested only in textual accounts, in Assyria this relationship can be observed also in visual narratives – on monumental stone slabs (palace reliefs for instance) and on small finds as cylinder and stamp seals.

The uniqueness of the Assyrian ruler as the king chosen by the great gods is represented in the royal ideology in various forms and occasions.³⁴ To the greatest extent the motif of the unrivalled king is developed in the introduction of the royal inscriptions, where all the qualities and capabilities of the ruler are mentioned.³⁵ Some of them are also presented in the accounts of the military campaigns. Other textual and visual sources describing the various functions and roles that the king combined under his authority also affirm the idea of uniqueness. There are specific cases, as well as various formulaic expressions where this idea was clearly and unambiguously stated – *šar lā šanān* (unrivalled king) or *ina malki ša kibrāt erbetta šāninšu lā išū* (who has no rival among the rulers of the four quarters). This ideological motif is attested for sure in Sarduri I's six duplicates from Van – *šar šāninšu lā išū* – king who has no equal.³⁶

³² CTU A 10-5 Vo: 22'-25'.

³³ More on this aspect of Assyrian royal ideology, see ODED 1992, 9-27; LIVERANI 2017, 36; TARHAN 2022, 244-251, 254.

³⁴ KARLSSON 2016, 75, 122-123.

³⁵ For more on that, see TARHAN 2022, 255-261, 333.

³⁶ CTU A 1-01: 2. The motif of the unrivalled king could be observed not necessarily by using phrases such as *šar lā šanān* but simply expressing ideas that conveyed the superiority of the king, be it the kings of the 3rd mill. B.C. Mesopotamia, or later the Babylonian and Hittite kings, but not only. Such ideas are attested in texts of various genres, but especially in the royal inscriptions, which follow certain principles with regard to the structure and content. More on the royal titles and motifs attested in the 3rd-1st mill. B.C. Mesopotamia, see SEUX 1967, 18-462; more on similar motifs and especially on the development of the Hittite royal inscriptions and similar motifs discussed above, see SAZONOV 2019, 57-80.

Conclusion

Ashurnasirpal II's campaigns failed to weaken Urartu. On the contrary, he seems to have given an impulse for the creation of the Urartian state – a phenomenon often described as secondary state formation. After the reign of Aramu, the ruler Sarduri I entered the political scene, under whom the first royal inscriptions appear. It was during his reign that the Neo-Assyrian cuneiform writing system, one of the main elements of Assyrian culture, was adopted by Urartu. The Urartian royal titulary and epithets, both of which were closely associated with royal ideology, were taken over from the Assyrians. Aside from them, many other ideological motifs and patterns were borrowed as well. The appearance of royal inscriptions using similar royal titles, epithets and motifs as those in the Assyrian royal inscriptions clearly demonstrates the intention to create an Urartian state modelled after the prototype of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Other key motifs of Assyrian royal ideology, such as that of the relationship between the king and the supreme god, were also adopted by the Urartians. All these circumstances had an impact on the development of Urartian kingship and ideology. This led to the effective functioning of the state, to the benefit of the royal inscriptions, court culture and the culture in general.

Abbreviations

CTU = SALVINI, M. 2008-2012. *Corpus dei testi Urartei, (Volumes I-IV)*. Roma: Istituto di studi sulle civiltà dell' Egeo e del vicino Oriente.

RIMA 1 = GRAYSON, A. K. 1987. *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Assyrian Periods, vol. 1: Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millennia BC (to 1115 BC)*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

RIMA 2 = GRAYSON, A. K. 1991. *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia, Assyrian Periods, vol. 2: Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC I (1114-859 BC)*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

RIMA 3 = GRAYSON, A. K. 1996. *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia – Assyrian Periods, vol. 3: Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium BC (858-745 BC)*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

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