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The Syro-Ephraimite War in the Context of Assyrian Trade Interests in the Southern Levant: Insights from Nimrud Letter 2715

Abstract: Previous interpretations of the so-called Syro-Ephraimite War (2 Kgs 16:5; Isa 7:1–2; cf. 2 Chr 28:5–8) have highlighted the political aspects of this conflict, such as the expansionist ambitions of Assyria, the anti-Assyrian coalition of Aram and Israel, the loss of independence by Judah, and the negative influence of the empire on religion and worship in Jerusalem. However, new archaeological discoveries and an adequate historical contextualization of the events shed new light on the nature of this conflict. Nimrud Letter 2715 suggests an economic motivation behind Tiglath-pileser III's military actions in the southern Levant during this period (access to maritime trade routes and new channels for the flow of goods). Similarly, the Syro-Ephraimite-Judean conflict appears to have been driven by economic considerations (control over trade routes through Transjordan towards Arabia and Egypt). The prospect of economic benefits also motivated the Kingdom of Judah to enter into a vassal relationship with Assyria, leading to development and prosperity in the kingdom, as confirmed by recent archaeological findings. In light of this historical reconstruction, King Ahaz emerges as a shrewd strategist and initiator of his kingdom's development.

Keywords: Syro-Ephraimite War, Ahaz (king), Tiglath-pileser III (king), Books of Kings, Kingdom of Judah, Assyria

Introduction

The attack on Jerusalem by Rezin, king of Damascus, and Pekah, king of Israel (2 Kgs 16:5; Isa 7:1–2; cf. 2 Chr 28:5–8) along with the appeal by Ahaz of Judah to Tiglath-pileser III,[1] king of Assyria,

[1] The full form of this name in Akkadian is *Tukultī-apil-Ešarra*, which translates to "My trust (is in) the heir of Ešarra." In the Bible, this name appears in several distorted forms: *tiglat pil'eser* (2 Kgs 15:29, 16:7, 10), *tilləgat pilnə'eser* (1 Chr 5:6,

for intervention (2 Kgs 16:7; cf. 2 Chr 28:16), is commonly referred to in the literature as the Syro-Ephraimite War.[2] This episode is one of the most frequently analysed events in the history of ancient Israel and Judah, with biblical authors presenting it from various perspectives (2 Kgs, Isa, 2 Chr).[3] The traditional interpretation in 2 Kgs 16:5 assumes the existence of an anti-Assyrian coalition of Aram and Israel, which turned against Judah following Ahaz's refusal to join the alliance. In response, the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III waged war against the coalition and defeated both Aram and Israel (733–732 BCE), annexing their territories (or parts thereof, in Israel's case) and transforming them into Assyrian provinces. In this context, biblical authors portray King Ahaz negatively:[4] as an opportunist lacking faith and trust in God's workings (Isaiah), as responsible for Judah's dependency on the Neo-Assyrian Empire (2 Kgs, 2 Chr), as the cause of its diminished regional standing (2 Chr), and as a promoter of foreign worship practices (2 Kgs, 2 Chr; according to traditional interpretations, this is suggested by the episode of the new altar in the Jerusalem temple, constructed in the Damascus style, 2 Kgs 16:10–16). However, these events appear to be much more complex than suggested by the biblical narratives,

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2 Chr 28:20), or *tilləgat pilneser* (1 Chr 5:26). This figure is also referenced by the Babylonian title *pûl* (2 Kgs 15:19; 1 Chr 5:26).

[2] The term "Syro-Ephraimite War" is misleading, as it implies that Syria (Aram) and Ephraim (Israel) are opposing sides in the conflict. However, in the events described, Aram and Israel actually form one side of the conflict, while Judah – conspicuously absent from the term – is the opposing side. Although many commentators have noted this inconsistency, the term "Syro-Ephraimite War" has become so entrenched in the literature that it is difficult to imagine it being replaced.

[3] For a comprehensive treatment of the topic, see Thompson, *Situation and Theology*. Additionally, for a comparison of the narratives about Ahaz and the Syro-Ephraimite War in the Books of Kings and Chronicles, see Smelik, "Representation of King Ahaz," 143–185; Yamaga, "So-Called Syro-Ephraimite War," 31–60. For the Isaiah perspective on these events, see, for example, Vasholz, "Isaiah and Ahaz," 79–84; Gitay, "Isaiah and Syro-Ephraimite War," 217–230; Reventlow, "Religious Alternative," 36–51; Mastnjak, "Judah's Covenant," 465–483.

[4] For biblical interpretations of Ahaz, see, for example, Amar, "Chaotic Writing," 349–364; Hermanowicz, "Obraz Asyrii," 210–211, 216. For extra-biblical interpretations of Ahaz, see, for example, Begg, "Ahaz," 28–52.

which assess individuals and historical events from a theological perspective.[5] For a full picture, these events should be viewed through the prism of new sources and archaeological discoveries.

1. The Geopolitical and Economic Context of the Syro-Ephraimite War

The Second Book of Kings recounts that Rezin, king of Aram, and Pekah, king of Israel, marched against Jerusalem and besieged Ahaz, king of Judah, but were unable to defeat him (2 Kgs 16:5; cf. Isa 7:1). Although the biblical text does not provide the reasons for this attack, historians and biblical scholars generally link the dynamics of this conflict to Tiglath-pileser III's military operations in the southern Levant in 734 BCE (specifically his campaign against Philistia) and Ahaz's refusal to join the Aramean-Israelite anti-Assyrian coalition. This interpretation assumes the existence of such a coalition,[6] which is far from evident. It is surprising that none of the Assyrian sources mentions it in the context of Tiglath-pileser III's western military campaigns in 734–732 BCE, even though analogical Assyrian sources frequently refer to similar coalitions or allies in other contexts. Hence, as early as the 1970s, Bustenay Oded suggested that the attack by Aram and Israel on Judah might not have been anti-Assyrian in nature, though it could easily have been perceived as anti-imperial by the Assyrians. Instead, it may have stemmed from Damascus's ambitions to expand south-eastward.[7] Roger Tomes notes the absence of extra-biblical evidence for an anti-Assyrian context to the Syro-Ephraimite attack on Judah and the inconclusiveness of the biblical texts on this issue.[8] It appears that the actions of Aram and Israel in the north (2 Kgs) and of Philistia and Edom in the south

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[5] For example, Peter R. Ackroyd argues that, seen from a "neutral" vantage point, Ahaz's actions saved Judah from destruction and that the new altar in Jerusalem was not indicative of idolatry but rather expressed a "positive" religious reform of YHWH worship; see Ackroyd, "Biblical Interpretation," 247–259.

[6] The first to put this forward was August Knobel in his 1843 work *Der Prophet Jesaia*, 52–53.

[7] See the entire discussion in Oded, "Historical Background," 153–165.

[8] See the discussion in Tomes, "Reason for the Syro-Ephraimite War," 66–68.

and east (2 Chr) were not anti-Assyrian, that is, they did not stem from a coalition against Tiglat-pileser III. Instead, they seem to have been more local efforts aimed at reclaiming territories lost to Judah due to its earlier expansionist policies.[9]

The hypothesis that the Syro-Ephraimite-Judean conflict was local and "non-Assyrian" in character has recently been expanded by Yaniv Shtaimetz.[10] He suggests placing it in the context of Aramean expansion southward and Damascus's struggle for control over Gilead. Shtaimetz notes that Aram-Damascus was the only regional power at the time, and that the revolt against Ahaz of Judah led by Pekah, king of Israel and vassal of Aram, along with Rezin, king of Damascus, aimed to install Ben-Tabe'el on the throne in Jerusalem (as explicitly suggested in Isa 7:6). Ben-Tabe'el would have been the ruler of southern Gilead (formerly anti-Aramean, now pro-Aramean) and his succession would have made Judah a dependent territory of Aram. By this logic, Pekah and Rezin's attack on Judah was intended to consolidate power in the region around Damascus rather than targeting Assyria.[11]

The geopolitical picture of relations between Aram, Israel, Gilead, and Judah in the latter half of the 8th century BCE should take into account another important element, namely the economic context of the conflict.[12] It is evident, both in antiquity and beyond, that the expansionist policies of empires are designed to yield tangible economic benefits. One can naturally consider the general principle of whether, and to what extent, economic interests motivate political actions, or conversely, whether and to what extent political actions are intended to yield economic benefits. These considerations are relevant in the context of the struggle to expand spheres of influence in the region by both Rezin, king of Aram, and Tiglath-pileser III (see the discussion later in the article). If we accept Bustenay Oded's thesis, as developed by Yaniv Shtaimetz, that the Syro-Ephraimite

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[9] Cf. Tomes, "Reason for the Syro-Ephraimite War," 70–71.

[10] Cf. Shtaimetz, "Was It a Syro-Ephraimite War?," 354–361.

[11] Cf. Shtaimetz, "Was It a Syro-Ephraimite War?," 356–357, 360.

[12] This has already been noted by Mitchell, *Israel and Judah*, 330–331; Kuhrt, *Ancient Near East*, 467; Dubovský, "Tiglath-Pileser III's Campaigns," 156; and Dearman, *Book of Hosea*, 22.

attack on Judah was driven by Aram's struggle for control over Gilead and an extension of Aramean influence southward, it is very likely that economic motivations were involved. This is because key trade routes, including the so-called King's Highway, ran through Transjordan (and Edom), connecting southwards to Arabia and Egypt, and northwards to Syria and Mesopotamia. Significantly, 2 Kgs 16:6 mentions that at the time Rezin, king of Aram, restored Elath to Aram, expelling the Judeans and settling Edomites there. Despite the interpretive difficulties in this passage and the textual changes proposed by some scholars,[13] the fact remains that control over Elath – a crucial centre at the crossroads of key trade routes – is depicted by the biblical author as a vital element in the region's political struggle. Taking the biblical text at face value, it cannot be ruled out that – for at least some time – Edom, along with Elath, was under Aramean control, further indicating Damascus' hegemony in the region. Only then would its expansionist efforts have been interpreted as anti-Assyrian by Tiglath-pileser III (see the discussion below). Without a doubt, Judah's loss of Elath must have been a severe blow to the economic interests of Ahaz, a vassal of Assyria, and indirectly to the imperial interests as well.

2. The Syro-Ephraimite-Judean Conflict and Tiglath-Pileser III's Campaigns in 734–732 BCE

From its very inception, the Neo-Assyrian Empire was intent on the conquest of the West. Although Tiglath-pileser I was the first Assyrian ruler to reach the Mediterranean coast with his armies as early as around 1100 BCE, the conquest of the West by Assyria was neither easy nor linear. As Ariel M. Bagg points out, the regions in the West were the target of one-third of all military campaigns during the Neo-Assyrian period, with Assyrian rulers traversing the southern Levant a total of 67 times. During the most intensive period, between 738 BCE (Tiglath-pileser III) and 645 BCE (Ashurbanipal), the Assyrian kings launched a total of 12 military campaigns in this region. Considering also the campaigns against

[13] See the summary of the discussion in Thompson, *Situation and Theology*, 82.

Egypt (the first and third campaigns of Esarhaddon and the first and second campaigns of Ashurbanipal), Assyrian armies were present in the region on average every 5–6 years.[14] This statistic clearly reflects the empire's significant interest in controlling this part of the Levant and the fact that with the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (744–727 BCE), occasional military expeditions aimed at acquiring loot and cheap labour were replaced by regular campaigns executed according to a well-planned imperial strategy for conquering successive regions.[15]

In analysing Tiglath-pileser III's military campaigns in 734–732 BCE, Peter Dubovský reconstructs their course, distinguishing three phases of the ruler's activities.[16] The first stage, referred to in Neo-Assyrian sources as the campaign against Philistia (12th *palû* of Tiglath-pileser III), saw the conquest of the Mediterranean coast from Tyre and Arwad to Gaza. The second phase, described as the campaign against Damascus (13th *palû*), involved an attack on Aram (excluding its capital) and Transjordan to prevent the epicentres of the conflict (Damascus and Samaria) from supporting each other, cut them off from food supplies, and block potential aid from the east. The third stage, also referred to as the campaign against Damascus (13th–14th *palû*), resulted in the conquest of the epicentres, which had been cut off on all sides from possible aid. Aram-Damascus became an Assyrian province, while Israel, with its territory reduced, retained relative independence due to the enthronement of the pro-Assyrian Hosea in Samaria.

From this sequence of events, it is evident that Tiglath-pileser III's initial military operations in 734 BCE were directed solely against the city-states of the Phoenician and Philistine coast, which had renounced their loyalty to Assyria, declared after its earlier campaign in the region in 738 BCE. This rebellion appears to have been supported by Egypt, so the goal of the 734 BCE campaign was not only to restore Assyrian control over the coast (including, of course,

[14] See the summary of Assyrian activity in the West in Bagg, "Palestine under Assyrian Rule," 120–123.

[15] Cf. Dubovský, "Tiglath-Pileser III's Campaigns," 153.

[16] Cf. Dubovský, "Tiglath-Pileser III's Campaigns," 158–161.

control over Mediterranean trade) but also to cut off Phoenicia and Philistia from Egyptian support in the event of further rebellions. Additionally, Tiglath-pileser III's presence in the region in 734 BCE likely drew his attention to the expansionist efforts of Aram and its vassal Israel,[17] which, from the Assyrian perspective, could only have been seen as a threat to the stability of the entire region and the empire's control over it. It is therefore not surprising that further operations were deemed necessary in the following years, 733–732 BCE, their aim being the defeat of Damascus and its allies, Israel and the Arab tribes. Thus, it seems that Tiglath-pileser III's activities did not provoke Rezin, king of Aram, and Pekah, king of Israel, to form an anti-Assyrian coalition and attack Judah, a response which would have been illogical in the context of the events described. Instead, it was the expansionist ambitions of Aram and its ally Israel that were interpreted as anti-Assyrian, provoking the Assyrian king to act, namely to strengthen the empire's position in the southern Levant by removing its opponents and taking control of their territories.[18] This is precisely what occurred as a result of Tiglath-pileser III's actions: Rezin and Pekah were assassinated in 732 BCE, and their territories (partially in the case of Israel) were annexed to the empire.

3. Tiglath-Pileser III's Policy in the Southern Levant: Trade and Economy in Light of Nimrud Letter ND 2715

In the context of Assyrian activities in the southern Levant, the focus is usually on their political dimension, that is, Assyria's territorial expansion aimed at extending its sphere of influence to the West, ultimately leading to greater or lesser integration of these areas into the empire. However, it appears that one of the main motivations behind Tiglath-pileser III's campaigns in the southern Levant was not purely political but was driven by economic considerations, particularly commercial interests related to access to the Mediterranean Sea.

[17] This has already been suggested in Oded, "Historical Background," 164–165.
[18] Cf. Dubovský, "Tiglath-Pileser III's Campaigns," 155.

Nimrud Letter ND 2715,[19] referenced in the title, is one of the rare pieces of material evidence that allows us to view Tiglath-pileser III's military operations from a broader perspective, namely through the lens of Assyria's economic interests in the southern Levant.

The letter (see the full text of ND 2715 in the Appendix), written by Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur,[20] governor of the Assyrian province of Ṣimirra,[21] mentions, among other things, how the inhabitants of Sidon opposed Assyrian fiscal policies under Tiglath-pileser III and how their rebellion was suppressed by an invasion of Itu'eans allied with Assyria. The sender of the letter also informs the king about trade restrictions imposed on the inhabitants of Sidon and steps taken in the city of Kašpūna to stabilize the situation in the region. A historical reconstruction of these events suggests that the letter was most likely written between the fall of Tyre in 734 BCE and the capture of Gaza in 734/733 BCE,[22] placing it in the context of Tiglath-pileser III's campaign against Philistia and, in the longer term, the Syro-Ephraimite-Judean conflict.

ND 2715 reveals that Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur, as Assyrian governor, imposed taxes and appointed tax collectors over the ports along the Lebanon mountain range, thereby controlling the entire region and its trade in goods such as timber. This included imposing restrictions on trade in certain commodities (see obv. 10–14, obv. 23 – rev. 2). This highlights the significant influence of the Assyrians on

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[19] The latest critical edition of the Akkadian manuscript is found in Luukko, *Correspondence of Tiglath-pileser III*, text no. 22. This document, inscribed in cuneiform on a clay tablet (obverse, edge, and reverse), was discovered in Nimrud (ancient Kalḫu), located approximately 30 km southeast of Mosul, Iraq. It is part of a collection of letters sent by governors of the empire's western provinces to Tiglath-pileser III, with Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur as the author of 11 out of the 25 recovered documents. See Kinowski, *Bloodshed by King Manasseh*, 113–124, 275–277 for a detailed analysis of the referenced letter, a discussion of philological issues, and the historical context. This article draws on some of the research results presented in that work.

[20] Translation from Akkadian: "May I behold the valour/courage of the god Ashur."

[21] This province covered the northern part of Phoenicia, that is, the coastal strip of land in present-day western Syria and northern Lebanon.

[22] See the discussion in Kinowski, *Bloodshed by King Manasseh*, 118–119.

the functioning of the Phoenician kingdoms under their control.[23] The trade restrictions reveal Tiglath-pileser III's strategy during his campaigns of 734–732 BCE, pointing to their economic aspects. Although these campaigns mark only the beginning of Assyrian interest in maritime trade through major southern Levantine city-states such as Tyre or Sidon, it seems that from the outset the impact of these campaigns on the local economy was both direct and significant.

On the one hand, the letter shows that Tiglath-pileser III did not block trade in the southern Levant after taking control of the region but allowed his vassals and their merchants to conduct business freely (see obv. 3–9). Moreover, in the Phoenician and Philistine kingdoms, he established his own *kāru*s and *bīt kāri*s, that is, ports and port trading posts (obv. 10–17).[24] This allowed the Assyrians to control trade along the entire eastern Mediterranean coast at relatively low cost, without the need for direct interference in local economic affairs.[25] In practice, as expressed in the letter, the Tyrian king had access to all ports, and his merchants could buy and sell goods without significant restrictions (obv. 3–7). The Tyrian king and his merchants were also granted full access to the Lebanon mountain range to import and trade timber (obv. 8–9). On the other hand, the Nimrud Letter confirms the importance the Assyrians attached to the development of trade in Phoenicia, which ultimately had to be

[23] This is also confirmed by another letter from Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur, written in the context of the activities of the Tyrian king Hiram (ND 2686; see Luukko, *Correspondence of Tiglath-pileser III*, text no. 23, obv. 8 – rev. 16). The letter reveals that the Assyrians prohibited, among other things, the removal of cult objects in the region.

[24] The Akkadian term *kāru* means port, quay, or trading post (see the entry "kāru" in von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, 451b; and the entry "kāru A.1-3" in Gelb, *Assyrian Dictionary*, K, 231–237). In contrast, the Akkadian expression *bīt kāri* refers to an administrative building or customs post for the managers of a *kāru* (see the entry "kāru" in von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, 451b; and the entry "kāru A *in* bīt kāri" in Gelb, *Assyrian Dictionary*, K, 237–239). Brigitte Warning-Treumann ("Plucky Coastal Traders," 8, n. 4) explains that in ND 2715, the term *bīt kāri* refers to an administrative building where accounts were settled and where goods subject to customs were stored pending their redistribution.

[25] Cf. Younger, "Assyrian Economic Impact," 184–185.

subordinated to the interests of the empire. An example of this is the trade restrictions mentioned in the letter: the Phoenicians were prohibited from trading with the Egyptians and the Philistines (b.e. 26–27) in order to limit the latter's access to natural resources in connection with the ongoing 734 BCE military campaign.[26]

Undoubtedly, the Assyrian policy toward the southern Levantine kingdoms aimed to benefit from local trade through taxing ports and specific goods such as timber. In this regard, ND 2715 is the only surviving document that mentions the imposition of the *miksu* tax on a vassal kingdom. In practice, the *miksu* tax was imposed on the exchange of goods within the empire, that is, on goods that crossed customs points between the provinces and the Assyrian imperial centre. It essentially did not apply to so-called international trade, or the exchange of goods outside the empire's borders.[27] The imposition of *miksu* on such forms of trade is an exceptional phenomenon and undoubtedly reflects Assyria's strong position in the region and its intensified commercial interests in Phoenicia. The letter in question thus confirms the assumption that Tiglath-pileser III's campaigns against the southern Levant in 734–732 BCE were not solely aimed at the territorial expansion of Assyria but were largely motivated by economic considerations, with the goal of dominating Mediterranean seaports and taking control of their trade to reap material benefits.[28] Assyrian control over coastal cities and trading centres such as Tyre, Sidon, and Arwad undoubtedly allowed Assyria to directly control Mediterranean trade, and provided constant access to a variety of agricultural products, luxury goods, and revenue from port fees.[29]

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[26] Perhaps the Assyrian trade restrictions mentioned in the letter actually refer to illegal wood trade between Phoenicia and Egypt on one hand, and Philistia on the other, which thrived despite the Assyrian embargo. Cf. Warning-Treumann, "Plucky Coastal Traders," 8–9; Watson-Treumann, "Beyond the Cedars," 77, n. 9.

[27] Cf. Postgate, *Taxation*, 131–134.

[28] Cf. Tadmor, "Philistia," 87–88; Oded, "Phoenician Cities," 42–49.

[29] Cf. Postgate, "Economic Structure," 198–199.

4. The Synergy of Assyrian Expansion Policy and Local Trade in the Southern Levant

As noted above, Tiglath-pileser III's activities in the West marked only the beginning of the Assyrians' active and permanent presence in the region. Over time, the relative autonomy of the city-states became increasingly illusory and dependent on close ties with Assyrian provinces such as Ṣimirra. Evidence of the intensifying pressure from Assyria on the southern Levantine kingdoms, which made them dependent on land supplies, is provided by a treaty between Assyrian King Ashurbanipal and King Baal of Tyre, dated around 676 BCE.[30] This treaty specified several important conditions regarding trade along the Phoenician coast, including the subordination of commercial activities to Assyrian regulations enforced by a representative of the empire (col. III, l. 6'–14'), regulations concerning trade routes and access to ports (col. III, ll. 18'–22'), and the imposition of fees for using these routes (col. III, ll. 22'–27'). The treaty also stipulated that no one was allowed to harm the Assyrians' hired seamen or their ships (col. III, ll. 27'–28'). Although this pact was concluded about 50 years after Tiglath-pileser III's reign and reflects the empire's policy in the time of Ashurbanipal, it is likely representative of the long-term goals of Assyrian policy, tracing its origins back to Tiglath-pileser III's campaigns. In fact, Assyrian dominance in the southern Levant, following Tiglath-pileser III's initial conquest in 738 BCE, opened new vistas for the imperial economy, which had previously relied heavily on resources from the agricultural plains of Asia. The vassal relationships with the Levantine kingdoms enabled Assyria to trade and encouraged the development of economic ties, ensuring peace and security for the exchange of goods while allowing the empire to maximize profits with minimal infrastructural investment.[31]

The long-term goal of Assyrian foreign policy appears to have been to compel external trade partners to reorganize their economic

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[30] Cf. Parpola and Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties*, text no. 5. For the significance of this treaty in the Assyrian provincial system, see Na'aman, "Esarhaddon's Treaty with Baal," 3–8.

[31] Cf. Bagg, "Palestine under Assyrian Rule," 131.

and trade activities to redirect the flow of goods to Assyria rather than to competing centres.[32] The integration of traditional Assyrian overland trade routes with maritime routes leading through Levantine ports marked a radical structural change in the imperial economy. External revenues to the royal treasury in the form of annual tributes, mainly destined for the so-called palace sector, were thus complemented by a steady flow of goods into the provincial channels of the empire's economy.[33] Assyrian policy essentially did not obstruct private or local trade in the Levantine kingdoms but aimed to benefit from it. Despite controlling the economy in the whole of the southern Levant, many branches of the local economy remained beyond the control of the Assyrians, who were never known for their skill in building or navigating maritime routes. Assyria did not maintain a "central" monopoly on trade, which allowed private trade to flourish, albeit under imperial regulations and fiscal charges such as customs duties and other state taxes. Consequently, Assyria accepted the existence of many Levantine kingdoms during its Western hegemony and did not impede maritime trade and its associated sectors.[34] Thus, a form of synergy can be observed between the imperial economy (palace and provincial sectors) and the local economy of the vassal states.

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[32] Cf. Frankenstein, "Phoenicians," 271.

[33] Trade in the Neo-Assyrian Empire can be divided into three sectors: the palace sector (including the courts, the king's family, and households of his close relatives), the provincial sector (the civil and military organizations of the empire), and the private sector. For more on this topic, see Postgate, "Economic Structure," 198–207. Susan Frankenstein, citing Leo Oppenheim, notes that the economic structure of Mesopotamia was an inevitable symbiosis between the "palace" and the merchant: the former depended on the latter for the import of basic raw materials and luxury goods, while the merchant needed the "palace" for protection and securing international contracts; see Frankenstein, "Phoenicians," 269.

[34] Cf. Elat, "Phoenician Overland Trade," 23–27; Postgate, "Economic Structure," 206–207, 214.

5. Tiglath-Pileser III's Campaigns, Ahaz's Appeal in 2 Kgs 16:7, and the Vassal Status of Judah

The analyses above and the previously discussed military operations of Tiglath-pileser III raise the question of King Ahaz's appeal in 2 Kgs 16:7. The logic of the biblical narrative suggests that the Assyrian campaigns against Aram and Israel occurred as a result of Ahaz, King of Judah, appealing to Tiglath-pileser III.[35] Historically, however, such a scenario seems unlikely as Ahaz's request does not appear to have directly influenced Tiglath-pileser III's military operations in the West.[36] Nevertheless, this does not, of course, undermine the historical authenticity of Ahaz's appeal. Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions provide numerous examples where Assyrian kings, acting as saviours, came to the aid of their vassals in times of need in accordance with the principle that harming a loyal ally was considered harming the political and economic interests of the empire. Bustenay Oded notes that military support to vassals in times of threat was not a legal or moral obligation for the Assyrian king, but was a service that came with expectations of benefit. Economically, Assyrian "protection" over vassal states provided tangible

[35] A different account is presented in the Books of Chronicles. According to 2 Chr 28:16, Ahaz sought military intervention from Tiglath-pileser III in response to the attack by the Edomites and Philistines (and not Aram and Israel, as mentioned in 2 Kgs). Moreover, according to the Chronicler, although the Assyrian king did come to Judah, he did not support Ahaz; instead, he oppressed him (2 Chr 28:20). Louis Robert Siddall argues that the Chronicler's account offers a more comprehensive view of the political situation, linking the attack by the Syro-Ephraimite forces in the north with the attack by the Edomites and Philistines in the east and south, which prompted Ahaz to seek Assyrian help. As a result of Tiglath-pileser III's military actions, Aram and Israel were subdued and became Assyrian provinces, while the Transjordanian kingdoms were made vassals of Assyria. The conflict, as seen through the lens of 2 Kgs, seems to present only the Syro-Ephraimite issue, depicting Tiglath-pileser III's actions as actual assistance in defending Judah. The Chronicler, on the other hand, appears to focus on Judah's southern neighbours. As regards their attacks, the actions of the Assyrian king were (from the biblical perspective) unsatisfactory or even insignificant (Tiglath-pileser III did not attack his vassals; his actions were not aimed at allowing Judah to gain control over Edom and Philistia, but rather at making Edom and Philistia vassals of Assyria); see Siddall, "Tiglath-pileser III's Aid," 102–103.

[36] Cf. Dion, "Ahaz," 134.

material benefits, such as regular tributes. From Ahaz's perspective, Tiglath-pileser III was his saviour from the threats posed by Rezin and Pekah, but in a broader perspective, Ahaz's voluntary submission to Assyrian suzerainty contributed to the expansion and consolidation of the empire's influence.[37] Thus, the greatest benefits were reaped by the Assyrian ruler.

Regarding the observations above, one might wonder at what exact point Ahaz became a vassal of Tiglath-pileser III. *Summary Inscription* No. 7 of this ruler lists Ahaz among Assyria's tributaries, but it does not mention the Aramean Rezin and the Israelite Pekah. It is therefore certain that Ahaz declared submission to the empire before the overthrow and death of both rulers in 732 BCE. However, the source lacks specific details on when exactly this submission occurred. A clue may be provided by the biblical text; in 2 Kgs 16:8, Ahaz is said to have sent a "bribe" (Hebrew: *šōḥad*) to the Assyrian king, rather than a "tribute," which would have been expected from someone seeking to become a vassal. As noted long ago by Hayim Tadmor and Mordechai Cogan, the use of this term is highly improbable in the context of political negotiations.[38] It cannot be ruled out that, from the biblical perspective, Ahaz's request for Tiglath-pileser III's intervention was not so much an expression of Judah's willingness to enter into a vassal relationship, but rather an appeal for protection, supported by a gift. It seems reasonable to assume that Ahaz was already a vassal of Assyria when he sought help from Tiglath-pileser III. Consequently, the declaration of submission would have had to occur earlier, that is, before or during the military campaigns against the Philistines in 734 BCE.[39] Another indication of Ahaz's vassal status is found in his message to Tiglath-pileser III, where he refers to himself as the king's "servant" and "son" (2 Kgs 16:7). The former term is a standard self-designation for a vassal, indicating Ahaz's previously declared submission to Tiglath-pileser III. However, it is puzzling that Ahaz also refers to himself as the king's "son," as this term has no parallel in Assyrian sources where a vassal

[37] Cf. Oded, "Ahaz's Appeal," 69–71; cf. Hermanowicz, "Obraz Asyrii," 216.
[38] Cf. Tadmor and Cogan, "Ahaz and Tiglath-Pileser," 499–501.
[39] See the discussion in Smelik, "New Altar," 269–270.

is never described as the king's "son" but as his "servant."[40] It seems that this expression was crafted by the biblical author to portray Ahaz negatively and emphasize his servile attitude towards Tiglath-pileser III, resulting in the loss of Judah's independence to the Neo-Assyrian Empire for over a century. This portrayal does not negate the previously expressed opinion that Ahaz may have already been a vassal of Tiglath-pileser III before seeking military assistance against Aram and Israel.

From the perspective of the biblical author, Ahaz's declaration of vassalage marked a critical phase in Judah's history. It is therefore not surprising that the entire account of Ahaz, whose reign is negatively assessed from the outset (2 Kgs 16:1–4), is disapproving. The biblical portrayal of this king is undoubtedly theologically charged.[41] However, considering the historical context of the events, it appears that Ahaz's action was a consciously adopted strategy intended to ensure years of peace and prosperity for Judah. By seeking Assyrian protection, King Ahaz demonstrated political acumen, saving Jerusalem and his throne and providing the country with new prospects for economic development.[42]

6. Economic Consequences of the Syro-Ephraimite-Judean Conflict

It appears that political and military considerations (Assyrian territorial expansion through conquest) were not the only circumstances that led King Ahaz to submit to Tiglath-pileser III. As previously suggested, Tiglath-pileser III very likely perceived the expansionist ambitions of Aram as anti-Assyrian and responded with military attacks after regaining control of the coast up to Gaza. Given

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[40] See the discussion in Tadmor and Cogan, "Ahaz and Tiglath-Pileser," 504–505; Dion, "Ahaz," 137.

[41] Klaas A.D. Smelik notes that when the account of the so-called Syro-Ephraimite War in 2 Kgs is read without literary context, it appears positive. It is the biblical author's negative assessment of Ahaz's entire reign in the introduction (16:1–4) that imposes a negative perspective on the reader; see Smelik, "Representation of King Ahaz," 156. Cf. Hermanowicz, "Obraz Asyrii," 216.

[42] Cf. Dion, "Ahaz," 142; Smelik, "Representation of King Ahaz," 154.

the clearly economic objectives of Tiglath-pileser III's campaigns, it is highly plausible that a significant stake in this conflict – besides control over maritime trade and the trade route along the coast, known as the *via maris* – was also control over land routes between Egypt and Mesopotamia, that is the mountain route through Judah and Samaria and the so-called King's Highway through Edom and Transjordan. It is reasonable to assume that Ahaz aimed to use the Assyrian attack on Aram and Israel to strengthen his position in the region, seeking to derive as many political and economic benefits as possible from an alliance with Assyria.

Significantly, recent archaeological research highlights the positive outcomes of Judean-Assyrian relations, even as early as the latter half of the 8th century BCE. Excavations recently conducted by Israel Finkelstein, Yuval Gadot, and Dafna Langgut[43] show that the Kingdom of Judah underwent significant transformation during the so-called Assyrian dominance (730–630 BCE). Although this period spans 100 years, there is substantial evidence (see below) suggesting that this dynamic transformation began as early as Ahaz's reign. The studies reveal that Judah transitioned from a kingdom with typical mixed Mediterranean agriculture meeting local food needs into one based on a specialized regional economy. This economic transformation of Judah was accompanied by administrative advancements, as evidenced by numerous seal impressions and impressions on the handles of jars used for storing agricultural products, as well as the distinctive *lmlk* (belonging to/for the king) seal impressions unique to Judah. These findings point to an extensive administrative system overseeing resources, such as liquid goods. According to the researchers, the unique system of marking storage jars in Judah cannot be a mere coincidence but most likely indicates centralized administrative control over the kingdom's economy.[44] All this, the researchers argue, should be interpreted in the context of Judah's integration as a vassal of Assyria into the empire's global economic system. They hypothesize that this integration was

[43] See the full argumentation and evidence in Finkelstein et al., "Unique Specialised Economy," 261–279.

[44] Cf. Finkelstein *et al*., "Unique Specialised Economy," 272–273.

initiated by the empire itself, which was directly instrumental in Judah's economic development between the latter half of the 8th century and the first half of the 7th century BCE.[45] It even appears that southern Palestine was a focal point of Assyrian economic activities in the region, practically leading to the creation of local economic centres and stimulating trade by providing access to trade routes toward Arabia, Transjordan, and Egypt.[46]

Interesting examples of this development come from the Shephelah region with evidence of large-scale specialized olive oil production even before Sennacherib's invasion in 701 BCE.[47] Admittedly, it is difficult to pinpoint the beginning of the process of transforming local 'private' production into 'mass' production – whether it occurred in the 730s or earlier – given that the available archaeological data fail to provide a definitive answer.[48] However, it is clear that Judah's entry into a vassal relationship with Assyria marked a significant watershed in the latter half of the 8th century BCE, which suggests that this new situation must have given an impulse for intensive economic development in the region. On the one hand, the necessity for the king to pay tributes to Assyria must have stimulated Judah's economic growth; on the other hand, as a vassal kingdom peacefully cooperating with the empire (at least during Ahaz's reign and the early years of Hezekiah's reign before he rebelled against the vassal *status quo*), Judah could benefit from its integration into the empire's global economy, including access to new trade routes. The discovered Assyrian personal artifacts, Assyria's influence

[45] Cf. Finkelstein *et al.*, "Unique Specialised Economy," 274. These scholars reject Avraham Faust's thesis that Assyria benefited from the prosperity of the controlled lands but did not generate this prosperity (Faust, "Interest of the Assyrian Empire," 76–78; cf. Faust, "Settlement," 781–783). Faust's theses are also countered by Younger, "Assyrian Economic Impact," 179–204.

[46] Cf. Finkelstein and Ussishkin, "Archaeological and Historical Conclusions," 602.

[47] This is an important chronological marker, easily identifiable in archaeological layers, which sets the boundary between material from the latter half of the 8th century (before Sennacherib's invasion) and that from the 7th century BCE. This is significant in that archaeology is usually unable to date findings to specific decades. However, in this particular case, it is possible.

[48] See the discussion in Finkelstein *et al.*, "Unique Specialised Economy," 270.

on regional architecture and religious mosaics, and the composition of texts and development of administration all indicate that the Neo-Assyrian Empire had a significant impact on nearly every aspect of the Kingdom of Judah's functioning.[49]

Indicative of the direct influence of Assyria on Judah's economy and administration in the latter half of the 8th century BCE are also recent studies by Neria Sapir, Nathan Ben-Ari, Liora Freud, and Oded Lipschits in Mordot Arnona.[50] Located about 750 metres southeast of Ramat Raḥel, approximately 3.5 kilometres south of the Old City of Jerusalem, the site yielded a large number of seal impressions (184), mostly on jar handles, with the majority (122 pieces) marked with the inscription *lmlk* (belonging to/for the king). A few of these also featured the inscriptions *yhwd* "Judah" (3 pieces) and *yršlm* "Jerusalem" (3 pieces). The authors argue that this points to the significant role of Mordot Arnona in Judah as an administrative and economic centre.[51] They hypothesize that Mordot Arnona, along with other royal estates around Jerusalem – particularly south of the city – functioned as early as the latter half of the 8th century BCE, before Sennacherib's invasion of 701 BCE. These estates served as southern agricultural backlands supplying food to Jerusalem and as administrative centres responsible for tax collection for the Neo-Assyrian Empire, which controlled the entire region. Thus, Mordot Arnona supported the operations of a larger and better-documented centre located near Ramat Raḥel and, together with it and another fortified tower west of Ṣur Bahir, formed a military, economic, and administrative "triangle of control" over the entire area. The authors suggest that the origins of this economic-administrative control network can be traced back to Ahaz's reign.[52]

As indicated above, Judah's entry into a vassal relationship with Assyria during Ahaz's reign marked the beginning of a new economic-political period in its history. Viewed in this light,

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[49] Cf. Finkelstein *et al*., "Unique Specialised Economy," 272.

[50] See the full argumentation and evidence in Sapir *et al*., "History, Economy and Administration," 32–53.

[51] Cf. Sapir *et al*., "History, Economy and Administration," 45–46.

[52] See the discussion in Sapir *et al*., "History, Economy and Administration," 47–49.

the Syro-Ephraimite-Judean conflict appears not so much a territorial conquest in the strict sense, but a struggle for spheres of influence and economic control. Just as the background of Tiglath-pileser III's campaigns against Phoenicia and the Philistines in 734 BCE involved the empire's economic and commercial interests in controlling the Mediterranean coast, its ports, and maritime trade routes – as indicated by the previously analysed Nimrud Letter ND 2715 – the backdrop for Aram and Israel's attack on Judah seems to be the control of transportation and trade routes through Judah, Edom, and Transjordan.

It is in a similar economic-commercial context that we can understand the Kingdom of Judah's entry into a vassal relationship with Assyria and its exploitation of the political situation following the conquest of Aram-Damascus and Israel and of seizing their privileged regional position for its own interests. In this sense, the Syro-Ephraimite war not only failed to bring about the downfall of the Kingdom of Judah but, paradoxically – thanks to the Assyrian military intervention – contributed to its economic prosperity, as suggested by the archaeological discoveries. Although these events are viewed negatively by biblical authors as Judah's ruinous submission to Assyrian interests (2 Kgs; cf. 2 Chr) and indicative of Ahaz's lack of faith in God's saving action (Isaiah),[53] their historical reconstruction suggests that they might mark the beginning of a "golden age" in Judah's history, with Ahaz as a far-sighted strategist who sought to leverage the geopolitical situation for the growth of his kingdom.[54]

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[53] Jasper Høgenhaven offers an interesting interpretation of the prophecies of Isaiah delivered in the context of the conflict in question and Ahaz's policies. He interprets the prophecy of the destruction of Aram and Israel, as well as the speech encouraging Ahaz, as prophetic endorsement of the monarch's pro-Assyrian (and simultaneously anti-Egyptian) foreign policy; see Høgenhaven, "Prophet Isaiah," 352–354.

[54] The way Tiglath-pileser III and his successors treated the rulers of the southern Levant, particularly the Phoenician city-states, allowing them to maintain relative autonomy and political independence without altering local borders, while ensuring Assyria access to fortresses and trade centres in the region, serves as an excellent example of how entering into a vassal relationship with Assyria and benefiting

7. The Consequences of the Syro-Ephraimite-Judean Conflict and the Episode of the Damascus-Design Altar

In the context of the political situation following the Assyrian conquest of Damascus and (partially) Israel, the biblical author recounts an intriguing episode involving Ahaz's visit to Damascus, where he met Tiglath-pileser III (2 Kgs 16:10). During the visit, which would have taken place after the city's capture in 732 BCE and would have provided an opportunity to pay tribute to the Assyrian king and present him with a ceremonial gift,[55] Ahaz is said to have been impressed by an altar he saw there. He instructed the priest Uriah to make a copy of it for the temple in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 16:11). The creation of the Damascus-design altar and its placement in the temple in the location of the bronze altar of Solomon would have effected changes in the worship practices there (2 Kgs 16:12–16). These details have sometimes been interpreted as evidence of the so-called Assyrianization of Judah, meaning direct Assyrian influence on religion and worship in Jerusalem.[56] The altar itself would have been a manifestation of Ahaz's blatant religious syncretism and idolatry. However, it has been conclusively proven that the Assyrians did not impose their beliefs or worship of their deities on conquered peoples that remained relatively independent vassal kingdoms outside

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from so-called *pax assyriaca* opened new opportunities for development for local rulers. Cf. King, "Eighth," 6–10; Dion, "Ahaz," 133; Younger, "Assyrian Economic Impact," 181–182; Aster, "Israelite Embassies," 194–197.

[55] Cf. Dubovský, "Tiglath-Pileser III's Campaigns," 166.

[56] This seems to be indicated by the biblical author's remark in 2 Kgs 16:17–18 that removal of certain temple furnishings (cutting off the side panels from the stands and taking the so-called "sea" from the bronze oxen) and the spatial reorganization in the temple (removing the Sabbath canopy and the king's outer entrance to the temple) were carried out "because of the king of Assyria" (Hebrew: *mippənê meleḵ ʾaššûr*). However, it is the contention of this paper that the phrase above should not be understood as suggesting these changes occurred "under the influence" of the Assyrian ruler. Instead, the literary context implies that the alterations were made "because of him," meaning that the bronze acquired in this manner was meant to be used to pay vassal tribute. Cf. Thompson, *Situation and Theology*, 84–85; Na'aman, "Royal Inscriptions," 347–348.

the strict boundaries of the empire.[57] The installation of the new altar in the Jerusalem temple and the associated reform of temple worship by Ahaz need not be interpreted as acts of idolatry.[58]

Several facts suggest rather positive and orthodox aspects of this event. Firstly, the responsibility for building the altar was assigned to Uriah, a priest deemed orthodox and trustworthy by the prophet Isaiah (Isa 8:1–2). Additionally, Isaiah does not criticize the altar or the associated reforms as acts of idolatry (see Isa 7–8). Moreover, the Damascus-style altar was intended for the worship of none other than the God YHWH (2 Kgs; unlike 2 Chr).[59] From a historical perspective, the construction of the new altar in Jerusalem patterned after the Damascus altar should most likely be viewed as part of a broader process of Aramaization occurring throughout the Levant during this period.[60] The cultic innovations mentioned in the biblical text did not have to result from the imposition of foreign forms of worship on Judah but rather from contemporary trends that influenced Judah and were inadvertently incorporated into local worship.[61]

The nature of these trends and interregional influences tends to be viewed as religious or political. However, considering the analyses

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[57] This has already been demonstrated by Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 72. The worship of Assyrian gods was expected and required in the Assyrian provinces but not in vassal states such as Judah; cf. Cogan, "Judah under Assyrian Hegemony," 407–409. See also the discussion in Bagg, "Palestine under Assyrian Rule," 125–128.

[58] Klaas A.D. Smelik argues that Ahaz's actions in the temple are neutral in themselves, but when framed by the biblical author within the broader negative criticism of this ruler, they are intended to appear as an act of apostasy stemming from Ahaz's political submission to Tiglath-pileser III; see Smelik, "Representation of King Ahaz," 157–159. Cf. Thompson, *Situation and Theology*, 84; Długoborski, "Wpływ imperialnej Asyrii," 151–152; Hermanowicz, "Obraz Asyrii," 210–211. The author of the present paper rejects the claim that the construction of the new altar reflected Ahaz's intention to introduce foreign cults in Judah, in contrast to e.g. Nawrot, *Gdy religia burzy i buduje*, 43.

[59] See the discussion in Smelik, "New Altar," 276–278; cf. Scolnic, "Altar of Ahaz," 173–178.

[60] Cf. Smelik, "New Altar," 274–275; Długoborski, "Wpływ imperialnej Asyrii," 153.

[61] Cf. Cogan, "Judah under Assyrian Hegemony," 413.

presented here, it is important not to overlook the economic or cultural tendencies that need not necessarily bear the stamp of idolatry (naturally, from a biblical perspective). An interesting interpretation of the Damascus-design altar was presented years ago by John W. McKay, to the effect that it was actually modelled after Phoenician patterns. This would have highlighted and reinforced Judah's commercial ties with Phoenicia. The development of trade with Phoenicia would have provided Ahaz with additional revenues for the royal treasury, which was then burdened with high tribute payments to Assyria.[62] Although this suggestion is purely speculative, the cultural-economic aspect cannot be ruled out as a background for the events described.

The fact that Ahaz was so impressed by the Syrian-style altar in Damascus that he commissioned a similar one for YHWH in the Jerusalem temple suggests that this was a material borrowing that symbolically represented Judah's emergence as a leading regional power following the reduction of Aram and much of Israel to Assyrian provinces. Even if the biblical authors present Ahaz's actions in a negative light, the historical reconstruction – if we accept the version of events presented in the biblical narrative – suggests that the Syrian altar might rather symbolize the special position of Ahaz, a vassal of Assyria, as a new regional hegemon replacing the ousted Rezin, king of Aram, with Jerusalem becoming the "new" Damascus. This interpretation would also support the earlier thesis that the underlying motive of the Syro-Ephraimite-Judean conflict and Tiglath-pileser III's campaigns in the southern Levant was the economic interests of the parties involved, resulting in mutual economic benefits for Assyria and Judah through the suppression of Aram-Damascus's inflated ambitions.

Conclusions: Politics and Economy (Always) Go Hand in Hand

The Syro-Ephraimite-Judean conflict has long captivated researchers striving to reconstruct its course and hypothesize about

[62] Cf. McKay, *Religion in Judah*, 7; Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 75.

the immediate and long-term consequences of Tiglath-pileser III's actions in the region. The focus has primarily been on political aspects: Assyria's expansionist ambitions to control the southern Levant, the anti-Assyrian coalition of Aram and Israel, and the loss of Judah's independence due to subjugation to the Neo-Assyrian Empire and its negative impact on religion and worship in Jerusalem through the process of so-called Assyrianization. Some of these assumptions have been rejected or refined through a broader understanding of the era, thanks to new archaeological discoveries and appropriate historical contextualization of biblical events.

The correspondence between Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur (ND 2715) and King Tiglath-pileser III reveals significant aspects of Assyrian activities in the southern Levant. It highlights the empire's commercial interests across the region as the backdrop to military operations in the West between 734–732 BCE. In light of this correspondence, Tiglath-pileser III's military campaigns in the Levant were driven not just by purely political motives, such as territorial expansion, but also (and perhaps primarily) by economic considerations. Continuous access to maritime trade routes opened new development opportunities for the Assyrian economy, providing a steady and uninterrupted flow of goods in addition to annual tributes. These insights offer a new perspective on the interpretation of the Syro-Ephraimite war and its consequences. The biblical narratives in 2 Kgs and the Book of Isaiah (2 Chr presents an alternative view) focus on the political context of Aram and Israel's attack on the Kingdom of Judah. However, recent research points to economic aspects of this conflict, namely that the stakes in this political game were control over lucrative trade routes through Transjordan towards Arabia and Egypt, rather than merely an anti-Assyrian rebellion against Tiglath-pileser III's activities in the region. The overall picture that emerges today seems to deviate from the previously accepted one. It was not Tiglath-pileser III's actions in the southern Levant that provoked the anti-Assyrian attack on Judah by Rezin, king of Damascus, and Pekah, king of Israel, but rather their actions, and above all, Aram's ambitions to control the entire region, including its economy and trade routes, that prompted the Assyrian king

to extend military operations in Phoenicia and Philistia to the east, against Israel, Aram, and its dependent territories.

In this context, King Ahaz's appeal to Tiglath-pileser III can be seen from a dual perspective: as an obvious strategic move to secure the overlord's protection for Judah from attacks by Israel and Aram, and more broadly, as Ahaz's readiness to assume a leading regional role in place of Rezin, king of Damascus, a position he ultimately achieved. The conquest of Aram and (partially) Israel and the reduction of their territories to Assyrian provinces dramatically changed the position of the Kingdom of Judah in this part of the Levant. It became a significant vassal state of Assyria in the buffer zone between the empire's borders and Egypt (a so-called "cushion state"), the only one capable of acting in the name of the empire as a political hegemon controlling the region, especially the flow of goods and commodities along trade routes between Arabia and Mesopotamia. This is evidenced by the constant Assyrian presence in Judah, which can be traced back to the time of Ahaz in the latter half of 8th century BCE (e.g. Mordot Arnona and Ramat Raḥel). With the establishment of a vassal relationship with Assyria and the elimination of major regional opponents (excluding, of course, Egypt), and thus the assumption of a leading position in this part of the Levant, the Kingdom of Judah entered a new era of development and prosperity. This is confirmed by recent archaeological discoveries, which clearly indicate the dynamic development of the kingdom even before Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in 701 BCE. The construction of a new altar in the Jerusalem temple modelled after the Syrian altar in Damascus (2 Kgs 16:10–14) could be seen as the first symbolic fruit of these new political and commercial relations in the region. In summary, it seems that King Ahaz was not as "bad" a king as the biblical authors portray him but rather a shrewd strategist and initiator of new developmental opportunities for his kingdom.

These observations affirm the commonly accepted truth that politics often (or almost always) goes hand in hand with the economy. Political actions are rarely motivated purely by ideological considerations (e.g. expansion or becoming a global empire), even if ancient texts (including biblical literature) attempt to persuade

readers otherwise. In the near or distant perspective, politics aims to achieve specific gains, including economic benefits. Equally important, economic and commercial interests strongly motivate specific political actions. This was also true of Tiglath-pileser III's military campaigns in the southern Levant, the Syro-Ephraimite-Judean conflict, Ahaz's political-economic strategies, and Aram's and its ally Israel's ambitions, although in the latter case, their strategy proved faulty, and the major "winners" (at least for a time) were Tiglath-pileser III and his vassal Ahaz, king of Judah.

Wojna syro-efraimska na tle asyryjskich interesów handlowych w południowym Lewancie według Listu z Nimrud 2715

Abstrakt: Dotychczasowe interpretacje tzw. wojny syro-efraimskiej (2 Krl 16,5; Iz 7,1–2; por. 2 Krn 28,5–8) wskazują na elementy natury politycznej tego konfliktu: ekspansyjne dążenia Asyrii, antyasyryjską koalicję Aramu i Izraela, utratę niezależności przez Judę czy negatywny wpływ imperium na religię i kult w Jerozolimie. Nowe odkrycia archeologiczne i adekwatna historyczna kontekstualizacja wydarzeń rzucają nowe światło na naturę tego konfliktu. List z Nimrud 2715 wskazuje na ekonomiczne tło działań militarnych Tiglat-pilesera III w południowym Lewancie w tym okresie (dostęp do morskich szlaków handlowych i nowych kanałów przepływu dóbr). Podobnie wydaje się, że względy ekonomiczne (kontrola nad szlakami handlowymi przez Transjordanię w kierunku Arabii i Egiptu) stały u podłoża konfliktu syro-efraimsko-judzkiego. Perspektywa korzyści ekonomicznych była też motywem wejścia Królestwa Judy w relację wasalną z Asyrią, dając impuls do rozwoju i wzrostu dobrobytu w królestwie, co potwierdzają najnowsze odkrycia archeologiczne. W świetle historycznej rekonstrukcji wydarzeń król Achaz jawi się jako wytrawny strateg i inicjator rozwoju swojego królestwa.

Słowa kluczowe: wojna syro-efraimska, Achaz (król), Tiglat-pileser III (król), Księgi Królewskie, Królestwo Judy, Asyria

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Appendix

Nimrud Letter ND 2715 cited after M. Luukko, *The Correspondence of Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II from Calah/Nimrud*, State Archives of Assyria 19, Helsinki 2012, text no. 22, adjusted slightly for clarity and grammatical accuracy.

Tablet's obverse, line 1: *To the king, my lord:* **2** *your servant Qurdi-Aššur-lāmur.* **3** *Concerning the Tyrean (king) about whom the king said:* **4** *"Speak kindly with him!"* **5** *All the ports of trade have been released to him;* **6–7** *his servants go in and out of the trading posts and sell and buy as they wish.* **8–9** *Mount Lebanon is at his disposal, and they go up and down as they wish and bring down the wood.* **10–11a** *I collect a tax from anyone who brings down wood,* **11b–13** *and I have appointed tax-collectors over the ports of trade of the entire Mount Lebanon. They are keeping watch over the* [*mountain/port*]. **14–18a** *The Sidonites chased away the tax-collector whom I appointed to the ports of trade that had been added to me in Sidon.* **18b–19** *Subsequently, I sent the Itu'eans into Mount Lebanon,* **20** *and they frightened the people.* **21–22** *Later on they* (= the Sidonites) *wrote to me, took the tax-collector*

and brought him into Sidon. **23** *I said to them as follows:* **24** *"Bring down the wood,* **25** *do your work there* **Beyond the edge of the obverse, lines 26–27:** *but do not sell it to the Egyptians or to the Philistines.* **Tablet's reverse, lines 1–2:** *Otherwise I do not let you go up to the mountain".* **3** *Concerning the people of Kašpūna about whom the king said:* **4** *"What have you given them for their safety?"* **5** *Even before they wrote to me from the Palace,* **6** *I had already started the work and performed it; afterwards,* **7** *they sent me a sealed document. (Even if) it had not come to me,* **8** *yet I had raised (my) hands as for erecting* **9–11** *towers but I did not construct the city-gate of the inner quarters. (But after receiving the sealed document) I immediately dropped (everything), took over their king's men* **12–14** *and they came with me. I appointed a eunuch over them as fort commander and made 30* [*Š*]*i'anean men enter there.* **15–16a** *They will keep the w*[*aṭ*]*ch, and release them thus by 30 men.* **16b–18** *As to what the king ordered: "Bring 10 Yasubaean households into Kašpūna!"* **19** *The water is strong there; the people will become ill.* **20–22** *As soon as they have been settled with their water in Immiu, I will bring them with (their) rations into Kašpūna.*