

# A LOST BATTLE OF KING AHAB REDISCOVERED

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## THE LEAGUE OF QARQARA

Archaeological discoveries have provided information relating to an otherwise unknown battle in which King Ahab participated against the Assyrians.

Shalmaneser III, King of Assyria, introduces himself thus:

[I am] Shalmaneser, the legitimate king, the king of the world, the king without rival, the great dragon, the [only] power within the [four] rims [of the earth], overlord of all the princes, who has smashed all his enemies as if [they be] earthenware, the strong man, unsparing, who shows no mercy in battle.<sup>1</sup>

Among his numerous monuments to himself is a stone stele erected on an upper bank of the Tigris River, in what was then the northerly reach of the Assyrian Empire. He had carved upon it a depiction of himself paying his devotions to the deities of heavenly bodies, and a text in cuneiform now known as the Monolith Inscription. In a first-person text, he recalls his doings during his first six regnal years (858-853 BCE), each featuring the military campaign that was the regular activity of the annual spring fighting season. In his accession year, he marched northward against Urartu (Ararat). The next year he turned westward, beginning a series of campaigns to impose his rule beyond the Euphrates River.

According to Shalmaneser's memoir:

I departed from the banks of the Euphrates and approached Aleppo... I departed from Aleppo and approached the two towns of Irhuleni of Hamat. I captured the towns Adannu, Barga [and] Argana, his royal residences. I removed from them his booty [as well] as his personal [palace] possessions. I set his palaces afire.

The power of Assyria was not yet at its apogee, but it was great enough for no single opponent to stand against it. Therefore, a congeries of local princes resolved to mount a collective resistance, and came together in an alliance that will hereafter be called the League of Qarqara, after the site where it

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made its stand. The existence of the League of Qarqara is recorded – though not under that name – in three extant sources: a full listing in the Monolith Inscription, and two later, shorter notices also dictated by Shalmaneser III. There is no other extant source, so it is known only from the viewpoint of the enemy it was formed to fight, reported only as he chose to report it.

To form the League, the prospective members had to carry on negotiations through envoys and messengers who went back and forth over hundreds of miles. Old enemies might have to make common cause for a time, until the intruder could be fended off. Each ruler who was approached had to make his decision:

- join the League and literally risk his own skin if the venture failed and brought down horrible vengeance on his people, or
- submit to vassalage, prostrate himself before the King of Assyria and pay his annual tributes, or
- stand still, and implore his gods to keep the dreadful Assyrian far away from him.

With one probable exception, the coalition of 853 did not overlap with the earlier failed alliances against Assyria, whose members had by then either submitted or been crushed. The members of the League of Qarqara were new actors on the stage, who came together not for an insurrection by the conquered but for concerted resistance by those not yet conquered, still independent but with their independence in jeopardy. The League took the field when the Assyrian host was advancing through Aram toward King Irhuleni's capital city of Hamat. At this point, Shalmaneser first takes notice of the allies, remarking that Irhuleni "brought [them] along to help him." If Irhuleni were now to surrender or be defeated, the Assyrian host, having secured his realm, would move on to the next victim. Thus, by standing with Irhuleni, the members of the League were trying to halt the enemy's march farther into their region. They chose to make their stand close to the city of Qarqara in northern Aram, beside the River Orontes and athwart Shalmaneser's road from Aleppo to Hamat.

The League could scarcely have been formed in hurried response to an emergency appeal while the Assyrians were traversing a route of less than 100 miles from Aleppo to Qarqara. The allies must have had their contingents ready and in place, which implies a forewarning or foreknowledge that

the self-styled Great Dragon was about to turn their way. Only the field where they actually assembled to engage the foe, just one day's march short of Hamat, may have been chosen in some haste.

Before assembling there, the commanders had to collect soldiers, gear, and supplies, set men and beasts on the roads from far and wide, and when they finally came together had to argue out tactics and strategies. It would be odd indeed if all this could have escaped the notice of Shalmaneser's intelligence service, or that he was unaware of the size and components of the military force he expected to mow down.

#### THE MONOLITH INSCRIPTION

The account of the Battle of Qarqara is the only one in the Monolith Inscription that gives statistical details on the enemy's strength, and if those details are even roughly correct, they came from some more exact source than a quick count on the field. Perhaps, though this is entirely speculative, some of the data came from Assyrian agents placed in the various councils and camps of the allies. The statistics are all neatly reckoned in round numbers that may be taken as approximations of a more ragged reality.

I departed from Argana and approached Qarqara. I destroyed, tore down and burned down Qarqara his [text reads: my] royal residence. He [Irhuleni] brought to help him 1,200 chariots, 1,200 cavalrymen, 20,000 foot soldiers of Hadadezer of Damascus; 700 chariots, 700 cavalrymen, 10,000 foot soldiers of Irhuleni from Hamat; 2,000 chariots, 10,000 foot soldiers of Ahab the Israelite; 500 soldiers from Gua,<sup>2</sup> 1,000 soldiers from Musri,<sup>3</sup> 10 chariots, 10,000 soldiers from Irqanata; 200 soldiers of Mattin-baal from Arvad; 200 soldiers from Usunata; 10 chariots, 1(?),000 soldiers of Adin-baal from Shian,<sup>4</sup> 1,000 camel(-riders) of Gindibu' from Arabia; (?),000 soldiers of Ba'sa son of Rahubi from Ammon<sup>5</sup> – [all together] these were twelve kings.

Although the text concludes "these were twelve kings," it lists only eleven names of rulers or states. A tally of "twelve" often appears in Assyrian texts on foreign coalitions, and may be a standard round figure rather than an exact reckoning. Yet, it is also possible that one more participant at Qarqara was accidentally omitted. Seemingly, the stonecutter who incised the Monolith

Inscription was not at the top of his profession, for modern Assyriologists with their own more precise mastery of Akkadian cuneiform have detected some fifty linguistic and orthographic errors in the text, ten of them in this campaign of the year 853. Additionally, exposure to the elements for almost 3,000 years took its own toll of legibility. Some of the names and numbers are therefore problematic, and there is no other known source for comparison.

When battle was joined, the Assyrian force had already marched into Aram-Hamat, so Irhuleni was the only member of the League whose territory had been breached and towns despoiled. If the Assyrians moved forward on their present course, they would soon come to the city of Hamat, beyond which lay Aram-Damascus and then Israel. These were the very three states whose kings now stood at the head of the League and made the heaviest commitments to it. Hadadezer of Damascus, as has been seen, was almost certainly the Ben-Hadad who had within the past three years launched and lost Aramaean Wars I and II against Israel, waged at about the same time Shalmaneser was battering Ahuni of Bit-Adini. The other members were for the most part smaller kingdoms or even smaller city states, with contributions proportionate to their resources.

As for the collective size of the combatants and equipment of the League, these subsume infantry, chariot corps, cavalry, and camel corps. The infantry is the largest element, but its number cannot be reckoned or even estimated, because the figure for Irqanata is dubious<sup>6</sup> and those for Shian and Ammon are indiscernible. Jiggling the maximum and minimum possibilities for these three, the highest tally for the entire League would be about 70,000 and the lowest about 45,000-50,000.

The war chariot had been the most formidable arm of battle since the middle of the second millennium, and chariot warriors constituted the military elite. At this period, a chariot was drawn by two horses and normally carried two men, one to drive and one to fight. The combined chariotry of the League is reckoned by Shalmaneser at 3,940 vehicles, and these would require close to 8,000 men and 8,000 horses in action, with extra horses kept in reserve lest an equine casualty leave a vehicle and two men useless.

Cavalry had been introduced into the region only in the tenth century, and were still of limited use. A horse and rider could go where a chariot could not, but saddles and stirrups were as yet unknown, so a cavalryman had difficulty retaining his precarious seat, controlling his mount, and wielding his weapons all at the same time. Sometimes men rode in pairs, with one managing the reins of both horses while the other fought. Depending on whether or not this was the technique at Qarqara, the horsemen of Aram-Hamat and Aram-Damascus were either 1,900 fighters or 950 fighting units.

A war camel carried two men, one to control the mount and one to fire arrows or hurl spears with a higher view and more flexible range than a warrior on a horse or in a chariot.

Shalmaneser did not on this occasion record the size of his own army, but on another expedition into the same region eight years later he led 125,000 men, although it is not clear whether these were all infantry or included chariot crew and cavalry as well. Four years after that, his inventory of resources included 2,002 chariots and 5,542 horses. After another four years, he had 2,001 chariots and 5,242 horses.<sup>7</sup> In view of the extensive territory he controlled, the vassals he had to keep in order, and the conquests to which he aspired, this was not a stupendous military machine and, with multiple frontiers to guard he could not commit all of it to a single expedition. Even so, on the field at Qarqara, the Assyrian infantry almost certainly had a heavy advantage over the combined opposition, an advantage that may have approached two-to-one. These men, with their rigorous discipline and hard experience, would be the weight – hitherto the crushing weight – of Shalmaneser's offensives. He may also have had an advantage in cavalry, but if his chariotry was no larger than that of his later campaigns, then the League's was superior and would be especially formidable on level ground. That may, indeed, be the reason why the allies chose to take their stand near Qarqara, in a flat area amid otherwise hilly terrain.

The Battle of Qarqara is known only as Shalmaneser recalled it. The longest account is in the Monolith Inscription:

They rose against me [for a] decisive battle. I fought them with [the support of] the mighty forces of Ashur, which Ashur my lord has given me, and the strong weapons Nergal [the war god] my leader, has presented me, [and] I did inflict a defeat upon them between the towns Qarqara and Gilzau. I slew 14,000 of their soldiers with the sword, descending upon them like Adad when he makes a rainstorm pour down. I spread their corpses [everywhere], filling the entire plain with their widely scattered [fleeing] soldiers.<sup>8</sup>

When Shalmaneser brought his triumphs up to date in the text of the Black Obelisk, his notation on Qarqara was briefer and brisker than the earlier rhapsody on slaughter. Here he named only the two Aramean kings who were his nearest adversaries and therefore, perhaps, deemed his chief opponents.

Shalmaneser describes the battle as a grand victory for himself. The rulers of Assyria were not wont to describe their battles any other way. There is no testimony from any other source as to how the League really fared, but there is mute testimony in what Shalmaneser failed to do next. He did not enumerate the usual sequels of Assyrian victories: no vaunts of terrified kings prostrate before him in supplication, no tally of booty and rich tribute, no gloating over towns razed and populations massacred or enslaved. He did not reach Hamat, much less pass it. He carried his march no farther into Aram or beyond it. Rather, he embarked on sea cruise, for which he would have had to backtrack out of landlocked Aram. Those who had defied him remained free and independent. They did not crush him, nor could they realistically have hoped to do so, but their lands and peoples emerged unharmed. This was the whole purpose of risking their treasure and their blood. After 853, Shalmaneser did not immediately resume his annual march across the Euphrates, but turned his attention elsewhere. When he did reappear, after a five-year interval, he found the resistance neither deterred nor diminished.

#### KING AHAB'S ROLE IN THE LEAGUE OF QARQARA

The first object of establishing a monarchy in Israel was to have a national war chief, and from time to time kings of Israel and Judah did lead their troops into battle. This Ahab had done recently in Aramaean Wars I and II, and he would soon do so again in Aramaean War III, but it is not known

whether he also took the field in person at Qarqara. The Monolith Inscription names some of the allies by state alone and others by ruler and state. If giving the name of the ruler was meant to distinguish those who were present in person, then Ahab was among them, but that is merely conjecture.

Whether the king of Israel led or sent it, his army was large and formidable. Israel's contribution of 10,000 infantry was outnumbered only by that of Aram-Damascus. Its 2,000 chariots were more than all the other contingents combined, over half the total for the entire alliance. That means personnel of at least 2,000 chariot warriors, 2,000 charioteers, and 4,000 warhorses in harness, with reserve replacements for both men and steeds. Indeed, Ahab's chariotry was equal to Shalmaneser's, an odd parity between a small realm and the great power of the age, and the fact that Assyrian kings boasted of capturing chariots and horses confirms their high value.

Adding noncombatant support personnel, from squires to grooms to cooks, and sturdy asses bearing provisions and supplies, it would have been a long and imposing train that took the road for some 250 miles from Samaria (Shomron) to Qarqara – a march of close to two weeks at the least. This was a hefty and expensive force for any ruler in the region, much less for one who had so recently been hard put to muster a defense for his capital city. This seeming discrepancy has inspired several contradictory hypotheses, designed either to account for or to discount the might that Ahab showed at Qarqara.

#### 1. THE MONOLITH INSCRIPTION IS A FLAWED SOURCE:

Among the numerous scribal errors in the text, ten have been detected in the section on the Battle of Qarqara. In a work so imprecise, there may lurk other, less conspicuous errors. This leaves an opening for the argument that some of Ahab's 2,000 chariots did not come from the royal stables but from a slip of the chisel. An error in the count of chariots would be of consequence only if it were substantial; for instance, if the figure of 2,000 should have been 200.

That would leave Ahab with a force too small to earn him his place near the top of the list of allies. It would also reduce the League's combined chariotry from 3,940 to 2,140 – a theoretical textual emendation that would deprive the coalition of its best hope for success. Indeed, had Israel not entered the field with the full number of chariots attributed to it, the League might have failed to draw the line that Shalmaneser could not pass.

2. THE TEXT OF I KINGS 20 IS A FLAWED SOURCE:

For the sake of this argument, the Monolith Inscription data are accepted as valid, and invoked to bolster the view that Ahab was too strong to have been the beleaguered monarch of I Kings 20.

As has been seen, this is unlikely.

3. THE NUMBERS ATTRIBUTED TO "AHAB THE ISRAELITE" INCLUDED CONTRIBUTIONS FROM JUDAH:

Jehoshaphat, the reigning king of Judah, did have substantial military resources (II Chron. 17:1-13). He and Ahab were related by marriage, and in the near future first Ahab and then his son Jehoram would solicit a wartime alliance with Jehoshaphat. On both occasions, the king of Judah granted the request, but he commanded his own men in person. He did not send them off to fight under the command of the king of Israel.

Although Jehoshaphat may have loaned some chariots and horses to Ahab for the Battle of Qarqara, that possibility is unattested. Be that as it may, the rapprochement with Jehoshaphat would now have proved valuable to Ahab. The force committed to the League must have been a substantial part of his military resources and *matériel*. To send it so far away, perhaps under his own command, would tempt neighbors to take advantage of Israel's reduced defenses. The entente with Judah meant that one border at least was secure and that Jehoshaphat would conceivably deter the Philistines, Arameans and Moabites from attempting any mischief.



These varied attempts to explain a seeming contradiction or discrepancy address a phantom problem. Omri had "might" to show, and Ahab inherited it. Between his accession and the Battle of Qarqara, he had two decades on the throne to enhance that might. The king who built the "ivory house" and the cities would have been remiss had he not also built the means to defend them. Archaeological evidence at Sebaste (Samaria), Megiddo, Hazor, Dan and elsewhere proves that massive fortifications and supply depots were added in his time.

As for personnel, the men of Israel had indeed been greatly outnumbered by those of Aram-Damascus in Aramaean Wars I and II. That disproportion appears again at Qarqara, where Ahab had a minimum of 14,000 men compared to a minimum of 23,600 for Ben-Hadad/Hadadezer. Israel could never match Aram-Damascus in numbers in any battle. As for *matériel*, Ahab utilized – or perhaps even built – the stable complexes at Megiddo, so he must have had need of equine accommodations. That the king himself and his chief minister headed the mission to secure fodder for the warhorses during the famine implies that there were many troughs to fill.

The textual evidence of I Kings 20, so far from disqualifying Ahab as the incumbent monarch in that chapter, provides an explanation for his remarkable strength at Qarqara. Ben-Hadad had equipped himself so lavishly for his first attack against Israel that he could not have expected that nation to be easy game: *And Ben-Hadad, the king of Aram, gathered all his force . . . and horses and chariots; and he went up and laid siege to Samaria and fought against it* (I Kgs. 20:1). The king of Israel, for some unexplained reason, had to rely on only a fraction of his military resources, but nevertheless put the Arameans to flight. If, in fact, the invaders were trapped in a narrow defile, that would explain why they could not manage to extricate their chariots and, like Ben-Hadad himself, abandoned them. Ben-Hadad's advisors then counseled him: *"Number yourself an army, like the one you lost, horse for horse and chariot for chariot, and fight them in the plain . . ."* (I Kgs. 20:25). This second army fared even worse than the first, and again all was lost.

Some of Ben-Hadad's horses would have been killed and his chariots wrecked in these two frays, but the bulk would have been spoils for the victor, absorbed into Ahab's own stables and storehouses. One may reasonably suppose that, at Qarqara, Ahab fought with some of the very same warhorses, chariots, and weaponry that his *pro tem* ally Ben-Hadad had amassed for his failed attacks on Israel.

#### AHAB THE ISRAELITE

A remaining curiosity in the Monolith Inscription is the designation "Ahab the Israelite." It was standard practice in Assyrian archives to dub the kingdom of Israel "*Bit-Humriya* [House of Omri]" long after the dynasty itself was no more. The Assyrians even referred to King Jehu, bane of the Omrides and founder of the dynasty that replaced them, as "Son of Omri." Ahab was literally the son of Omri, ruler of the land of *Bit-Humriya*, yet here the identification with the House of Omri is missing, just where it would have been most apt.

Most curious of all is the lack of any biblical record of the Battle of Qarqara. The role of Israel and Ahab was significant, perhaps indispensable, in an event of great consequence. It may well be that Israel's strength in chariotry saved the League from the defeat that Shalmaneser claimed, thereby safeguarding Israel and the entire region from the horrors of an Assyrian invasion. It would be strange indeed for such a campaign to rate no mention in the state annals of Samaria, yet the biblical narrator completely disregards it.

This cannot be the result of an indifference to military affairs, since he devotes two whole chapters to Ahab's military history in Aramaean Wars I, II, and III. However, unlike any other armed conflict in the historical books of the Bible, the Battle of Qarqara was not fought in the Land of Israel or close by. It took place far away, at a time when the Assyrians were not yet at the gates, and so it may not have been considered part of the national story.

Whatever the rationale for leaving this gap, it was not filled for 2,714 years, and then only because someone chanced upon an upright stone slab, in a thinly populated area of southern Turkey, with cuneiform writing in which an Assyrian king meant to preserve his glory for posterity.

This chance discovery inspires tantalizing speculation: that there may be other chapters in Israelite history that were similarly lost and may yet be found or which will, perhaps, never come to light.

#### NOTES

1. The Assyrian texts quoted throughout this article are from the English translations of J. Grayson Kirk, published in Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926-1927).
2. "Gua" is a name otherwise unknown. The spelling may be one of the numerous scribal errors, but what the correct spelling should be is open to question. If it is "Que," then this member of the league was a small kingdom tucked away in the southeastern corner of Anatolia – perhaps the biblical "Qeveh" from where Solomon imported horses (I Kings 10:28). Its incumbent ruler was King Kati, the only member of the League who had already fought against Assyria in an earlier coalition. An alternative emendation is "Geba," the city state in central Phoenicia known to the Hellenes as Byblos, a more complex and less persuasive emendation that requires not the malformation of a single letter, but the omission of several letters. See especially Hayyim Tadmor, "Musri and Que," *Israel Exploration Journal*, XI:3 (1961) pp. 143-150.
3. "Musri" is another disputed identification. There is some evidence of a Musri close to Que, and two small states that stood side by side geographically, both vulnerable to the Assyrian advance, might well have stood side by side in the League of Qarqara. However, in Semitic languages the root *m-s-r* [denoting a borderland] also appears in the name for Egypt [Hebrew *Mitzrayim*], and the companion theory to Gua-equals-Gebel is that Musur-equals-Egypt. However, 1,000 infantrymen would be an unimpressive contribution, even by some minor pharaoh of an Egypt in decline. In any case, Shalmaneser repeatedly defines the coalitions against him as "kings of Hatti" and "kings of the seashore," placing them north and east of the Mediterranean. Egypt was far from either location and still generations away from its first known hostile encounter with Assyria. In II Kings 10:28, Solomon imports horses and chariots from "Egypt [*Mitzrayim*]" and from "Kue." In II Kings 7:6, there is a reference to a joint appearance of "*the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Egypt*." Geographically, Egypt is to the south of Israel while Kue and the Hittite regions are well to the north. In this traditional reading, both the imports and the supposed invaders would be coming from two opposite directions. The putative Musur, in contrast, would have been near Kue, in a region once part of the Hittite Empire and close to Anatolia that was noted for breeding horses.
4. Irqanata, Arvad, Usunata, and Shian were city states in Phoenicia, and their Mattin-ba'al and Adin-ba'al have typically Canaanite names. Here the doubts are not geographical but numerical: the figure of 10,000 infantry seems too high for Irqanata, and may or may not be an error for 1,000. It is not discernible whether Shian sent 1,000 or 10,000 infantry, but the smaller figure is more plausible. Arvad and Usunata could muster 200 men each. These four small polities might have had the option taken by Tyre-Sidon of rendering tribute to Shalmaneser. Instead, they dared to fight him.

5. Ba'sa ben-Rahubi of Ammon would be the ruler of a kingdom whose western border touched on Israel and northern border on Aram-Damascus. "Ben [son of]" can precede the name of a father or earlier ancestor, or a clan, or a locale, any one of which might define "Rahubi." In the Monolith Inscription, "Ammon" is one of the numerous words with flawed orthography, and that offers the possibility of the alternative reading that would place Ba'sa's realm farther north in the Amanus Mountains. Against that reading is the consideration that "Ba'sa ben-Rahubi" is a Semitic name, equivalent to the Hebrew "Ba'asha ben-Rehov," while Semitic languages were not common in the Amanus region. Ba'sa's military contribution at Qarqara was entirely in infantry, but at this point in the inscription there is a flaw that leaves the size of that contribution anywhere between 1,000 and 10,000 men. On the identification of this member of the League, see especially Gary A. Rendsberg, "Baasha of Ammon," *Journal of the Ancient Near East Society*, 20 (1991) pp 57-61.

6. See note 4 above.

7. On Shalmaneser III's military inventories, see especially Michael C. Astour, "841 BC: The First Assyrian Invasion of Israel," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 91:3 (1971) pp. 383-389..

8. See note 1 above.