

Why the Arameans?



By: K. Lawson Younger, Jr.

With the publication of my new book, [*A Political History of the Arameans*](#), people have asked, “why a book on the Arameans?” It is not always easy answering this question. In some confessional circles if I say, “the Arameans were an important people group mentioned in the Bible,” I get smiles and approving nods. If I say much more, there is a sliding scale of facial expression: starting with bewilderment and quickly moving to disinterest. Sometimes the question is “why a book on the Armenians?!” which, of course, requires an explanation regarding these ancient/modern people, why they are important, and how they are different from the subject of my book.

Yet, the Arameans were a remarkable group of linguistically related entities who played a very significant role in the history and culture of the ancient Near East. Emerging across a wide swath of Syria and northern Iraq after the collapse of Late Bronze Age kingdoms, their greatest legacy was undoubtedly the West Semitic Aramaic language—the *lingua franca* of the late Neo-Assyrian Empire and then the Near East until the arrival of Greek.

But Arameans contributed in many other ways to Iron Age civilization. Aramean political history sees a bewildering number of states at war with neighbors, including the Luwian polities of northwest Syria, the Israelites under David and Solomon, and most consequentially, the Neo-Assyrian Empire. But unlike their better-known neighbors, and because of their complexity, the Arameans remain poorly appreciated.

Politically, the Arameans were characterized by wide-ranging diversity, dictated in part by the geographic areas where they resided or moved, from the steppe regions east of Damascus to the irrigation agriculture zones of southern Mesopotamia. Neighboring peoples also dramatically impacted the Arameans. The fact that the Arameans adapted to their various geographic and cultural environments makes the study of their history both intriguing and challenging.



Zincirli, ancient Sam'al, citadel N hall, court official orthostat.

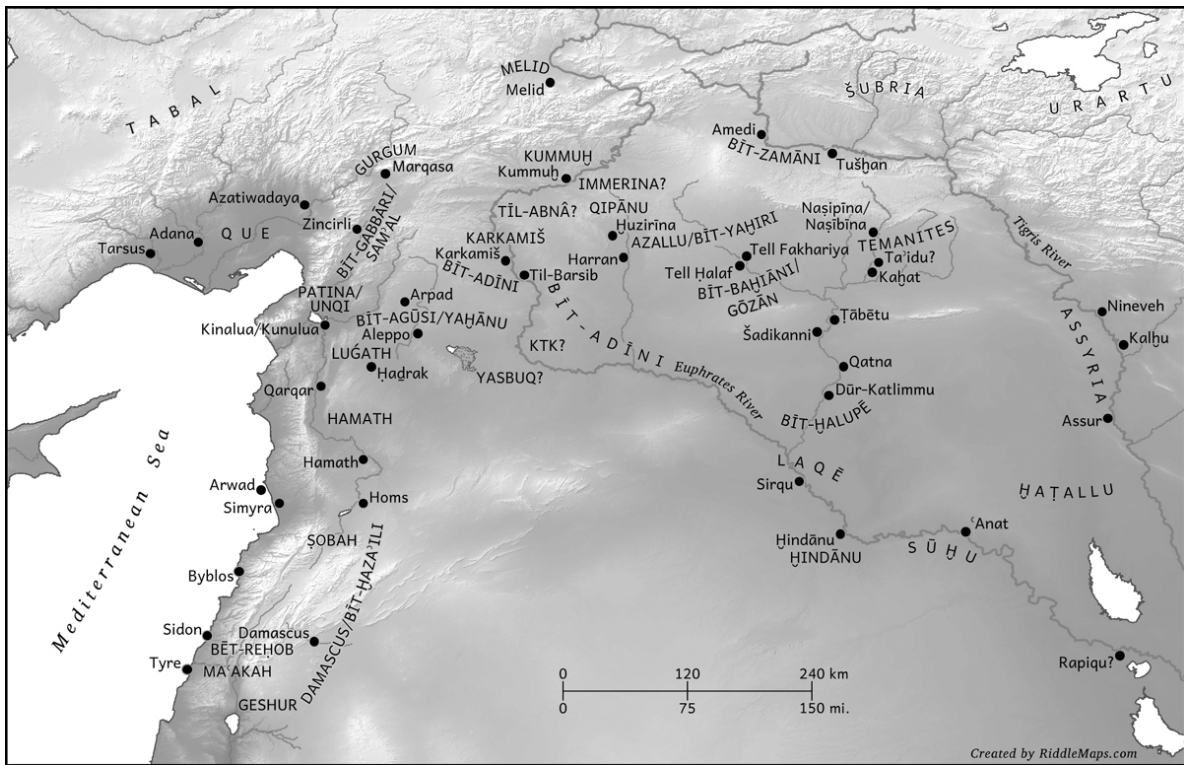
In my book, I explore these amazing people and their political structures, from the earliest origins in the Bronze Age to the demise of the last independent polities. While earlier histories of the Arameans tended to concentrate on their states, I have attempted a more detailed study of all levels of Aramean social entities, including tribes, their constituent clans and, above them, confederations. These social groups nested within one another, and split off and recombined as circumstances dictated. Genealogy was key: the dead were included in the community of the living, providing the links, real and imagined, between Aramean communities.

One of the best ways to engage Arameans is through a regional approach. I have investigated the various Aramean polities by examining four regions: the region of the Jezirah of northern Mesopotamia (where Assyrian power and influence was a particular challenge); Anatolian/North Syrian (where in the Iron I and II there was cultural symbiosis between the Arameans and the local Indo-European speaking Luwians); the Levant (central and southern Syria—a region that is still obscure in many ways); and finally, southern Mesopotamian (where the indigenous Babylonians and Chaldean groups—along with the geography—combined to create a very different environment for Arameans). Some Aramean entities opted to remain simply individual clan or tribal groups, others chose to configure tribal confederations, and still others set up tribal kingdoms.

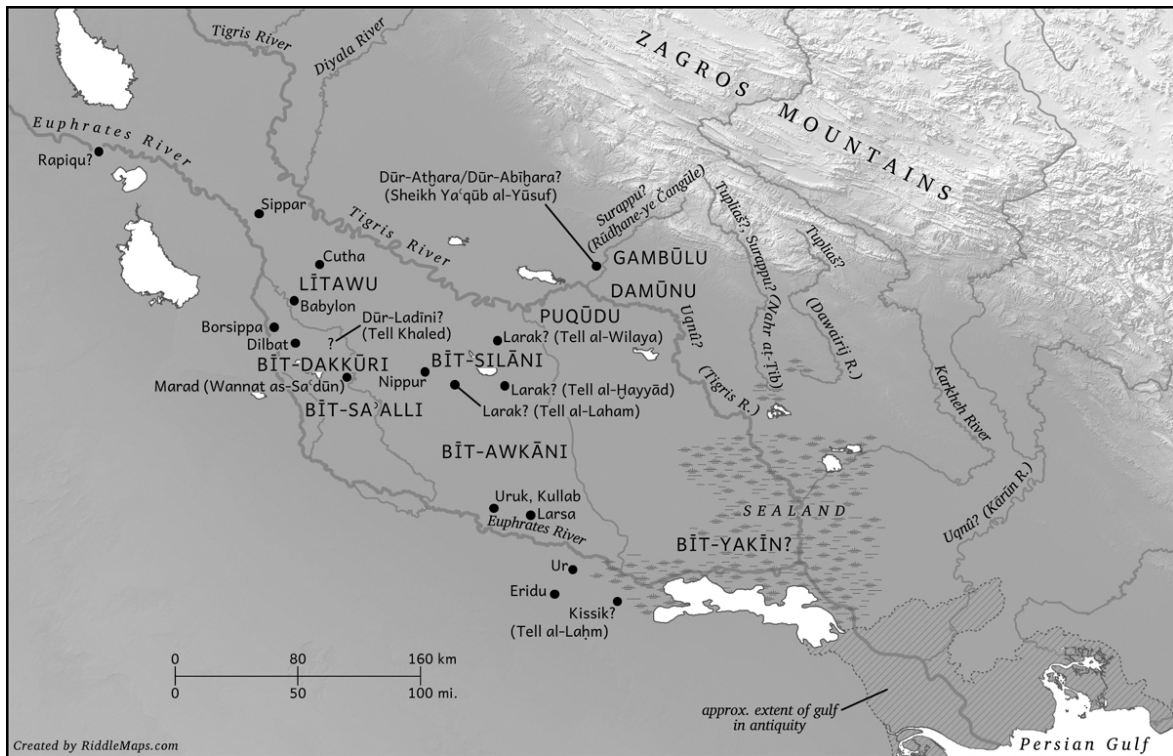
A more sophisticated, anthropologically nuanced approach to tribal structures builds on analogies from the earlier Amorite entities, in addition to a more robust study of the vocabulary that describes these tribal political structures (taking particular advantage of recently discovered texts). Examining these aspects yields a more comprehensive understanding the flexibility of Aramean political structures and how they functioned. The great complexity in the Arameans' political arrangements was partially due to the fluidity of their tribal structures, as well as their movements over time.

Aramean migrations were necessitated or stimulated by many push and pull factors, including traditional pastoral nomadic migration routes, and relationships with other nomadic groups that had previously moved to different parts of Mesopotamia and Syria. Geography and environment played a vital role in the

development of the Aramean polities, and I have paid close attention to the regional issues they encountered in the Jezirah, north Syria, south Syria, and southern Mesopotamia



Map showing extent of Aramean settlement.



Map of Southern Mesopotamia.

What makes the study of the Arameans even more interesting – and demanding – is all the new archaeological and textual data that have come to light in the last fifteen years. Two examples must suffice. First, archaeological work in the middle Euphrates region has revealed a fort system from the Middle Assyrian period (ca. 1200–1050 BCE), along with new Middle Assyrian texts. These necessitate a new

historical synthesis of Assyrian-Aramean interrelationships during this formative period. The decline of Middle Assyrian control after ca. 1050 BCE was one of the factors that permitted the Arameans to both move east and to create their own polities, and which in turn, stimulated the emergence of the Neo-Assyrian kingdom.

Second, new inscriptions have changed our understanding of the political extent of Aramean kingdoms. For example, a horse frontlet and horse blinker (booty from Hazael's campaign against the kingdom of 'Umq) engraved with the same inscription have demonstrated that contrary to early scholarly opinions, this ninth century king of Aram-Damascus expanded his kingdom northward. A stela fragment recently excavated at Tell Afis (ancient Ḥadrak) seems to preserve the name of Hazael, and confirms this assessment. These finds complement both older discoveries, such as the Tel Dan inscription, and the biblical accounts of Hazael's battles against Israel and Judah.



Hazael horse frontlet, Samos Museum



Stele from Tell Afis, temple A1.

The prime markers for the Aramean groups were twofold. First and foremost was the Aramaic language. The second was the abundant use of ethnicons or ethnic terms by many peoples, including the Arameans themselves, which describe their identity: designating that someone was a member of a socially constructed Aramean group was central.

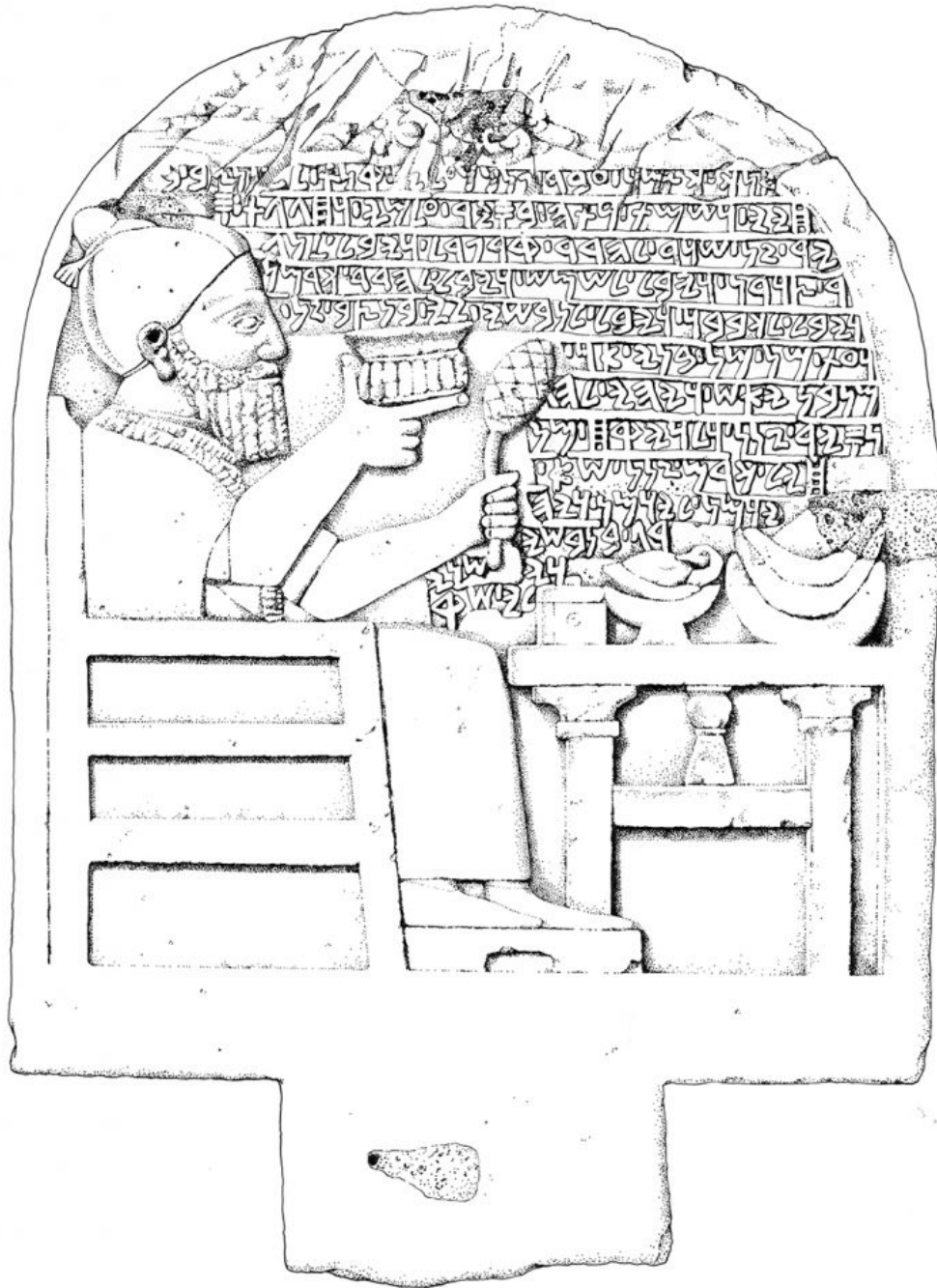


Zincirli, ancient Sam'al, sphinx column base.



Zincirli, ancient Sam'al,, Bar-Rakib inscription KAI 217.

Much of their complexity and history is known from the Arameans' interactions with other peoples, particularly the Assyrians and the Hebrew kingdoms. Yet some of the richest insights derive, of course, from their own inscriptions. The consistent, incredible ability of these Aramean groups to acculturate is a hallmark of their willingness to adapt to diverse regional influences, such as those of the Syro-Hittites. The only exception was the Aramean entities of southern Mesopotamia, who apparently maintained both social and cultural separation from the indigenous Babylonian culture.



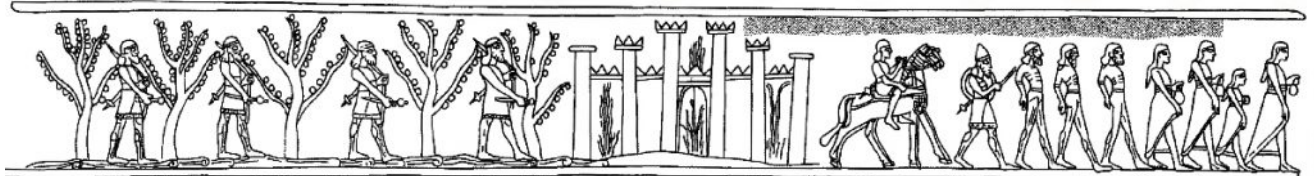
Katumuwa stele from Zincirli, ancient Sam'al.

The Assyrians and their imperial expansion had an unparalleled impact on the Arameans. The process began with Aššur-dān II in 934–912 BCE, followed by the ninth century conquests of Aššurnāširpal II and Shalmaneser III, who conquered all of the Jezirah and much of the northern Levant. Although Shalmaneser III claimed victory over a coalition that included Aramean and Israelite troops at the battle of Qarqar in 853, he was not actually able to defeat this coalition until 841, when it dissolved due to usurpations in Damascus and Samaria.

Those Aramean polities further away from the Assyrian heartland developed tribal kingdoms that provide us with some of the best information (e.g., Aram-Damascus, Arpad, Hamath and Luğath, and Sam'al). Unfortunately, just as these kingdoms blossomed, they were cut down by the conquests of Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BCE).



Gates of Ashurnasirpal II (reigned 883-859 BCE) from Balawat showing an attack on Aram.



Prisoners being led from the city of Qarqar.

Yet while the Assyrians effectively crushed the Arameans, there are three ironies. First, it was the Arameans who impacted the Middle Assyrian kingdom, playing an important role in its demise and thus in the creation of the Neo-Assyrian kingdom. Second, while subdued and absorbed by the Assyrians, the Aramaic language gradually became the *lingua franca* of the late Neo-Assyrian Empire and beyond. Thus, while throughout the period of the existence of the Aramean polities, the Aramaic language served as a prime marker of the Aramean groups, after the disappearance of these entities, it became their greatest legacy. Finally, as the Assyriologist A. Leo Oppenheim observed, due to their language and multifaceted migrations, the “ubiquitous Arameans” ultimately served as the conduit of intercommunication that transmitted knowledge throughout the ancient Near East and ultimately to the West.

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