

# Between Urartu and Assyria: the geography of a border region

DAN SOCACIU

University of Liverpool

## *ABSTRACT*

Urartu and Assyria were separated physically by the Taurus mountains, and also by a series of buffer-states. Urartu and Assyria were situated in neighbouring regions, but those are regions that had limited interactions between them and had different cultural and economic backgrounds. A close analysis of the border region between the two states allows a reflection on the nature of relationships between them.

## *KEYWORDS*

Urartu, Assyria, Borders, Geography, Buffer-states, Interactions

## 1. Introduction

The Neo-Assyrian Empire represents the first world-empire and was the most powerful political entity of its time. The Urartian kingdom was Assyria's strongest rival, at least up until the end of the eighth century BC. The capitals of the two states were separated only by 130 miles in a straight line, and we have a long list of warfare accounts between them in the ancient texts.

The aim of this contribution is to analyse the area separating Urartu from the Neo-Assyrian Empire, both from a geographical and a political point of view. This will help with a reflection on the nature of the two states, on their political and economic ambitions, and on the relationship between the two powers. The conclusion will also draw attention to limits that hinder research of these topics, and potential ways to overcome them.

Urartu and Assyria did not share a border, not in the modern way we think of one. The territory situated between the headwaters of the Tigris and of the Lower Zab was independent and acted as a buffer zone between the two states. The southern foothills of the mountains sheltered a number of political entities that managed to steer straight between the two crushing powers, and maintain a certain degree of autonomy, even after the initial expansion of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. This paper will bring into focus Šubria, Kumme, and Muşasir, which are some of the polities situated along the northern edge of Assyria during this period and represent the other half of the barrier separating the powerful empire from Urartu, alongside the Taurus mountains (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Historical background

The Kingdom of Urartu came to prominence in the Ancient Near East under the rule of Sarduri I, who founded the capital Tushpa on the eastern shores of Lake Van. The formation process of the Urartian state is not clear; we have a mostly finished product when the kingdom emerges in the ninth century BC.

We know that it grew out of a series of small political entities that, starting from the thirteenth century BC, united in different confederations known as Urartu and Nairi by the Assyrian sources.<sup>2</sup> The annals of Salmaneser mention the Urartian king Aramu, who's reign predated that of Sarduri. However, there is unfortunately no archaeological evidence for Aramu's existence, and we therefore have to consider Sarduri the founder of the Urartian state as we know it. Tushpa remained the capital of the kingdom for its entire lifespan, although other important centres were built in the Lake Van area. Toprakkale, for example, has puzzled archaeologists for decades. The most common theory is that it served as the main religious site after the destruction of Muşasir. From here, the kingdom quickly expanded, towards east and north, and also towards the west, although the western border of the kingdom, and Urartu's presence in that area, are less known. We can trace the expansion of Urartu into new territories by the inscriptions left on monumental stelae, on cliff faces, and included in dedicated structures. Under Minua, the Urartian dominion of the Urmia plain was consolidated. The destruction of Hasanlu, and the subsequent Urartian phase of the site, date to this period. His successor, Argishti I, expanded the kingdom north of the Araxes, with the founding of Argishtihinili and Erebuni.<sup>3</sup> In the second half, and towards the end of the eighth century BC, after more than a century of conquests, Urartu was threatened both from the South, by a stronger and more aggressive Assyrian Empire, and from the North by the Cimmerians. This moment put a stop to its growth and influence. The kingdom enjoyed again a period of prosperity, under Rusa III, during the seventh century BC.

Aside from the territory directly controlled by the kingdom, there was an outer circle of lands under Urartu's sphere of influence. We can see this clearly in Sargon's letter to the god Ashur, where he mentions both actual provinces of Urartu, and outer regions indirectly controlled by them. Urartu challenged Assyria's influence in both Northern Syria and southern Anatolia, and in north-western Iran.

<sup>1</sup> RADNER 2012

<sup>2</sup> SALVINI 1967

<sup>3</sup> FORBES 1983; PIOTROVSKY 1969.

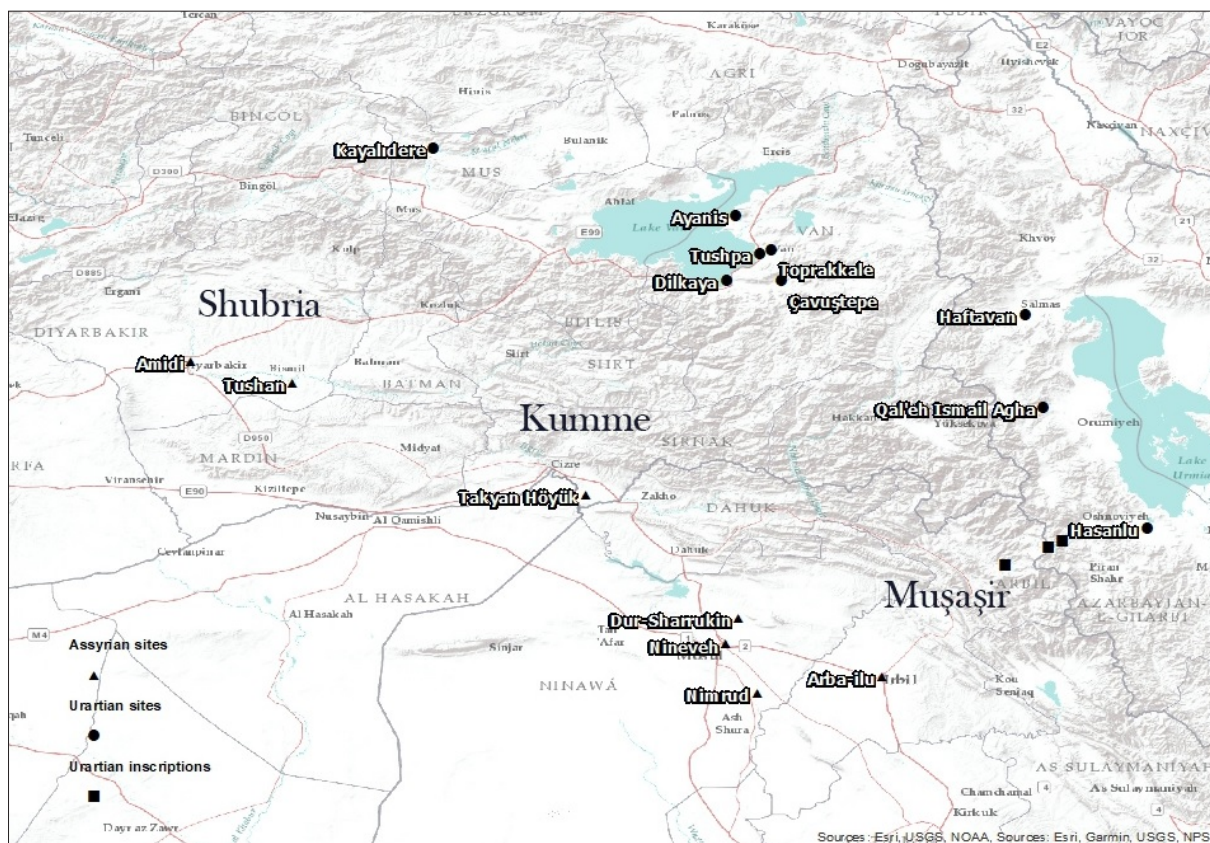


FIGURE 1  
The border between Assyria and Urartu

The southernmost Urartian inscriptions are found in and around the Kelishin pass; a pass that marks an important communication route leading towards Muşasir. These inscriptions are bilingual, written both in Urartian and Assyrian, which suggests they were meant for a broader audience. The topic of these inscriptions, one dedicated by Ishpuini and his son Minua, and the other by Rusa I (this one found in multiple copies), are journeys and offerings at the temple of Haldi made by these Urartian kings.<sup>4</sup>

There are no major Urartian sites in the Hakkari Province, directly to the south of Van, or to the south-west, towards the Upper Tigris. This area has a very rough terrain, and difficult climatic conditions, and therefore lacks year-round communication

routes. It was most likely travelled by semi-nomadic tribes, but at the current state of research there are no documented permanent settlements.

Assyria went through a period of upheaval and reassessment, like most of the Near Eastern and Mediterranean world, towards the end of the second millennium BC. This moment in history saw the Assyrian territory reduced to its core, with only a thin strip of land in their hands. Fortunes quickly changed: Assyria did not only survive but gave birth to an empire that eventually stretched from the eastern Mediterranean to the Gulf.

The first Neo-Assyrian kings conquered regions that they saw as rightfully theirs, following a pattern of conquest and control set out during the Middle Assyrian period.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> SALVINI 2008.

<sup>5</sup> LIVERANI 1988.

Ashur-dan II (934-912 BC) and Adad-ninari II (911-891 BC) focused heavily on the northern frontier, with campaigns into Kurdistan, and up the Tigris valley. The annexed territories were left under the control of local rulers in this initial stage. Tukulti-Ninurta II (890-884 BC) subdued Bit Zamani and consolidated the Assyrian rule in Northern Mesopotamia, but soon after, the rulers, who were now Assyrian vassals, were overthrown by local rivals, and Ashurnasirpal II was forced to attack Bit Zamani again. In the Upper Tigris region, and within the territories of Bit Zamani, the Assyrian provinces of Tushan and Amedi were created. These provinces were the northernmost territory controlled by the Assyrian kings. A series of fortified centres were built to enforce Assyrian rule. The most important one, which also served as the regional capital, was the city of Tushan. Ashurnasirpal also carried out a campaign in the Garzan and Bohtan river valleys, but there was no interest, or no means to bring this territory north of the Tigris under Assyrian control. Ashurnasirpal's campaign remains the only documented one in this region, and there are no Assyrian settlements in the Middle Upper Tigris valley.<sup>6</sup>

The shape of the northern territories of Assyria remains unaltered for about a century, until the creation of the imperial province of Mashennu in the Cizre plain.

### 3. Geographical and economic considerations

The high peaks of the Taurus mountains are the physical barrier separating the two powerful states. The Taurus create a great difference both in climate, and economy. They separate two different ways of subsistence, with dry farming in northern Mesopotamia being the backbone of the economy, while the limited amount of arable land, and the shorter growing season in the highlands, made it necessary to have a higher focus on animal husbandry compared to the lowlands. Nevertheless, Urartian irrigation works are well known, and they created an ingenious infrastructure, in order to

increase productivity. The two areas separated by the Taurus can also make use of different natural resources, with the Anatolian highlands abundant in construction material and metals, both of which are lacking in Mesopotamia.

Urartu's topography sets the kingdom apart from most states of the ancient Near East, and it separates it especially from the areas to the south, and to a lesser degree from the north.

«To a certain extent, Urartu may be considered a natural fortress, but is a fortress that has much stronger walls on some sides than on others»,<sup>7</sup> and the strongest wall is to the south. Lake Van lies 1,680 m above sea level, and the mountains rise abruptly from the southern and western sides of the lake. To put this into better perspective, it is worth mentioning that the Assyrian heartland's elevation is around 200 m above sea level, while the Upper Tigris Valley finds itself at around 600 m above sea level. The isolation of the Urartian capital, Tushpa, is clear when one looks at the routes in and out: there is no convenient passage to the south, and it is out of the way of the major routes to Iran (fig. 2). The topography is closely connected with the climate of the region, characterized by low temperatures and heavy snowfall, which means an early closing of the mountain passes, some only opened for a few weeks at the end of summer. This mostly affected opponents from the south, from where there is not a gradual approach. Another hindrance would have been the quality of the paths, not suited for carts and chariots. But elevation aside, it is the character of the mountains that isolates Urartu. The kingdom was situated on the Armenian Plateau, an area of intersecting mountain chains, characterized by the presence of depressions separated by highland areas. The result of this particular topography is a series of irregular pockets of land, each one with a rather modest amounts of arable land. These pockets of land, where the population was concentrated, would have been cut off from each other for several months a year, due to the severe weather conditions and the limited number of mountain passes. Essential for the survival of these communities was the economic self-sufficiency of each isolated depression.

<sup>6</sup> PARKER 2003.

<sup>7</sup> ZIMANSKY 1985, pp. 14-15.

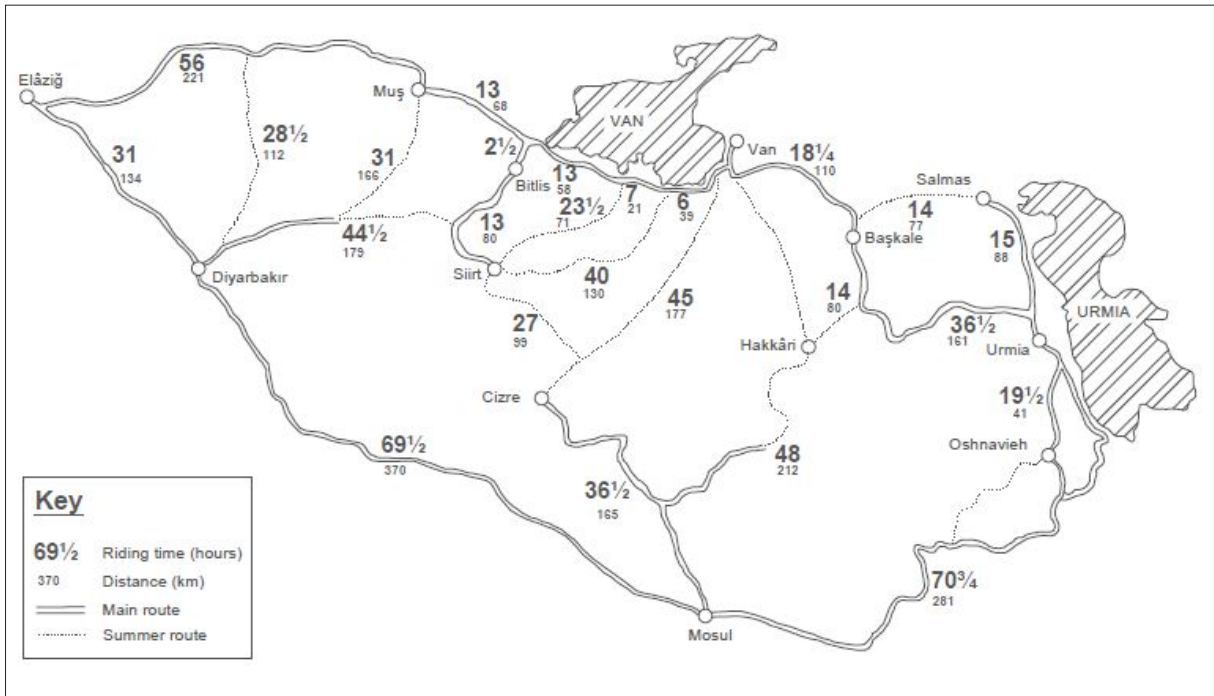


FIGURE 2  
Distances and travelling times, based on ZIMANSKY 1985, p. 29

«The extreme variations in topography, the short growing season, and the lack of adequate topsoil in eastern Anatolia have a significant impact on agricultural activities here».<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the highlands that were home to the Urartian kingdom had previously relied on animal husbandry as a primary source of income. Urartians created a series of irrigation systems in order to support cultivation, but even this has natural limits that were hard to overcome. Out of the three major lakes that are present in Urartian territory (Van, Urmia, and Sevan), only the Sevan lake has fresh water suitable for agriculture, but there is no archaeological or textual evidence for its use in irrigation, which seems to rely mostly on spring rainfalls and melting snow.

The directions in which Urartu spread indicate a need to secure land suitable for agriculture, which was needed to support a growing population.

The topography of the region allowed the survival of small political entities between the two

powerful states, sheltered by the foothills of the Zagros. They controlled remote territories, hard to bring under the direct control of either Assyria or Urartu.

#### 4. Buffer states

It is necessary to bring into the picture the small states mentioned previously. It is important to note that the exact locations of the states in question remain unclear, and it is not the aim of this paper to provide new insight into this problem. We know the broad area that they were in and that is sufficient for the following discussion. There are also other political entities apart from the one presented below, but they are either more difficult to ascribe with certainty to an area, like Hubuskia, or we have more fragmentary information on them, as in the case of Ukku.

Šubria stretched north of the Assyrian provinces of Amedi and Tushan. Šubria was the Assyrian

<sup>8</sup> ÇİFÇİ 2017, p. 29.

name for the state, whilst in the Urartian texts it was called *Qulmeri*. We know of two settlements within its territory, *Kullimeri* and *Uppummu*, for which the locations of the *Gre Migro* and *Fum* sites has been proposed.<sup>9</sup>

One of the things that makes this state stand out is the fact that ancient sources mention *Šubria* as a safe haven for refugees, where people fleeing both Assyria and Urartu were given shelter. Parker interprets this policy as «a means of defiance and ‘neutrality’ between the imperial powers»,<sup>10</sup> but another theory put forward link this practice with religious tradition.<sup>11</sup> There is no doubt that the *Tigris Grotto* was a sacred place for Assyrians, they considered it the actual source of the river. As early as the late twelfth century BC, *Tiglathpileser I* (1114-1076 BC) had made sacrifices and left an inscription at the site. *Shalmaneser III* (858-824 BC) also visited the site, and this was an important deed, depicted on the *Balawat Gates*. And these are only the accounts that survived until modern times. Two different Assyrian kings, in different eras, went out of their way in order to perform rituals at this remote site.

But we can assume this place held a much wider relevance, with the *Tigris* being a major Hurrian deity, a fact that must not be overlooked. The Hurrians were present in the area before the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, but we have so little information about them during the Iron Age that we must work on assumptions and common sense. There are a number of Hurrian names mentioned in connection with *Šubria*, but we cannot know the percentage of the Hurrian population. Nevertheless, they were present, among other groups of people, and there is no reason to doubt a certain degree of Hurrian cultural heritage.

It is safe to say that the ‘*Tigris source*’ had an international recognition, which might have granted *Šubria* the power to act as a neutral shelter. This state remained independent until the reign of *Esarhaddon*, in the first half of the seventh century BC, when it was annexed to the Assyrian Empire. We will see further

ahead that there was a change of strategy within the Assyrian Empire, that pushed them into areas from which they had previously held back.

Another political entity north of Assyria was *Kumme*. The most probable location for this state is on the upper reaches of the *Lower Khabur*.<sup>12</sup> This location is protected against the south, and easily accessible from the west.

The god *Tessub* of *Kumme* was well known from Hittite texts, as the king of heaven and earth. The storm god of *Kumme* is mentioned as early as the eighteenth century BC, in incantations found at *Mari*, and he is subsequently mentioned in the archives of *Hattusa*, the Hittite capital. The Hurrian heritage is even more evident in this case. The temple of the storm god of *Kumme* kept its prominence for at least a millennium. We know that *Adad-nerari II* paid homage at his shrine, with sacrifices performed in the god’s honour, a god that was also celebrated at the city of *Ashur*, and most likely, it is the origin for the Urartian storm god *Teiseba*. The importance of this deity and its shrine could be an explanation for the independence of *Kumme*.

Assyria did not initially take part in the administration of the *Cizre* plain, they secured the safety of the region through its ties to *Kumme*. They did not interfere directly until the reign of *Tiglathpileser III* (744-727 BC), when we see a shift in the Assyrian strategy. This was a period during which Urartian influence was ever growing. Urartu was allied with the Aramean tribes north of *Cizre*, who rebelled against *Kumme*, triggering an aggressive response from the Assyrian king. *Tiglathpileser* defeated the rebels and added the *Cizre* plain to the Assyrian province of *Mashennu*. He consolidated the Assyrian domain with the construction of several fortified centres in and around the newly annexed territory, which were populated with deportees from other regions. During his reign, again as a response to Urartian meddling in Assyrian affairs, *Tiglathpileser* turned the northern Syrian kingdoms of *Arpad*, *Hamat*, and *Unqu* into Assyrian provinces.

We have Neo-Assyrian texts that tell us about Assyrian spies located in *Kumme*, tasked with

<sup>9</sup> KESSLER 1995.

<sup>10</sup> PARKER 2002, p. 384.

<sup>11</sup> DEZSÖ 2006; RADNER 2012.

<sup>12</sup> RADNER 2012, p. 255

keeping an eye on Urartian activity.<sup>13</sup> It is possible that these small states were deliberately used as a buffer between Urartu and Assyria, that situation being preferable to a real border between them. The small states acted as unofficial intermediaries between Urartu and Assyria.

To go back to the states separating Assyria and Urartu, one of the most important ones, because of its connection to Urartu, was Muşasir. Muşasir, Ardini in the Urartian sources, most likely covered the high plain dominated today by Iraqi town of Sidakan. It was separated from Assyria by the Bradost mountain range, and from Urartu by the main ridge of the Zagros. The earliest mention is the campaign fought by Shalmanaser I, during the thirteenth century BC, against Musru and the holy city of Arinu. The religious importance of the site is therefore attested before the rise of the Urartian state.

Muşasir was home to the main temple of the god Haldi, a minor god who became the head of the Urartian pantheon. Haldi certainly had this role starting from the reign of Ishpuini, but an earlier connection with the Urartian royal family cannot be excluded, although he is not mentioned during Sarduri's reign. Subsequent kings made sacrifices, and dedicated buildings in honour of Haldi, and every success was considered to be a favour from their god.

We can see a pattern when looking at these small political entities: they sheltered sacred places, as already suggested by Radner.<sup>14</sup> Located in a particular area of the Ancient Near East, at the edge of both Anatolia and Mesopotamia, they developed a sacred value that ensured their independence, and kept them out the grasp of imperial powers.

But, the temple of Haldi at Muşasir was destroyed by Assyrian forces, during the eighth campaign of Sargon II in 714 BC. We have an account of this campaign in the letter dedicated to the god Ashur. This action broke Assyria's tradition of peaceful relation with these small states that sheltered religious sites. It happened in a context of an ever growing influence of Urartu, as we have seen earlier for the Assyrian expansion under Tiglathpileser. Sargon's actions in Muşasir might

have set a precedent that Esarhaddon followed when he invaded Šubria.

## 5. Conclusions

The geography of the region shaped the interactions between Urartu and the Neo-Assyrian Empire. As seen above, direct interactions between the two would have been very difficult, both because of the natural conditions of the terrain that allowed limited direct paths of travel, and for the political entities sheltered by the foothills of the mountains.

It is worth asking how strong Assyria's interest in the area north of the Taurus, Urartu's core region, was. Conquering and maintaining that territory would have been an arduous task, potentially not worthwhile. Even if they would have had access to stone, timber, and metals, it would have been difficult to get them south. Also, the area requires a different economic system, alien to the Neo-Assyrian empire. They would have needed the cooperation of the locals, but authority over such a region is hard to enforce. Urartu is an anomaly, and the debate about the degree of authority they had over the territory and the way they enforced it, is ongoing<sup>15</sup>. Assyria, through the control of the Upper Tigris, secured its access to natural resources it was lacking. Both the settlement distribution<sup>16</sup> and the pottery production<sup>17</sup> shows how the Upper Tigris changed once incorporated into Assyrian territories, and highlights the strategies used to control it. A similar scenario would be difficult to imagine in the Urartian territories.

It could be argued that the presence of Urartu in that remote region to the North was not a direct threat to Assyria. The Assyrians were interested in the west and in the east, and only the fact that Urartu moved politically in the same directions led to frictions between the two powers. Urartu was a threat when it tried to change the loyalties of Assyria's vassals, which meant a loss in economic revenue, as they stopped paying tribute.

<sup>15</sup> BERNBECK 2003-2004; DIAKONOFF 1991; MELIKISHVILI 1978; SMITH 2005; ZIMANSKY 1985.

<sup>16</sup> PARKER 2003.

<sup>17</sup> D'AGOSTINO 2016; GUARDUCCI 2013.

<sup>13</sup> DEZSÖ 2014.

<sup>14</sup> RADNER 2012, p. 245.

Based on the textual evidence, the two states were in an open conflict, especially leading up to Sargon's campaign, but on the ground the situation was more complex. The small states took up certain intermediary functions between the two bigger powers. «Not only these sanctuaries enjoyed the patronage of both Urartian and Assyrian kings, these buffer states also take the advantage of being located between these two kingdoms as intermediaries by providing information, goods and people».<sup>18</sup> It is possible these states had a privileged status due to their religious importance, but also due to being intermediaries, being allowed to operate between the two powerful states.

One of the biggest issues with this kind of reconstructions of past events, is that they are based mostly on texts. For the buffer states we have very few archaeological data to complement the literary sources, and in other areas with more archaeological information the two data sets do not easily overlap.

A good example of the latter is the area west of Lake Urmia. The area between the Zagros and the lake was object of an archaeological survey conducted, by Italian scholars, between 1976 and 1978.<sup>19</sup> The project was initially aimed at investigating the Urartian presence in the area, but it grew to incorporate archaeological data of any time period. The edited volume opens with Salvini's review of the

texts concerning the area, and it highlights the importance of the territory east of the Zagros for the Urartian rulers. They campaigned and expanded their territory in this direction early on, with numerous inscriptions being found, at least prior to Sargon's campaign. But the archaeological survey yielded few indicators of an Urartian presence, apart from the inscriptions and some fortified sites. Both the pottery and to some extent the settlement distribution show signs of continuity with the earlier Iron Age phases, with only two fortified sites that show a pottery assemblage that can be defined as purely Iron Age III, Qiz Qal'eh and Agil Tappeh.<sup>20</sup> The first also presents the highest percentage of red-burnished ware, the best indicator for an Urartian presence. The number of Toprakkale ware sherds recovered across the territory is extremely low, and Pecorella warns against describing sites as Urartian based only scattered and isolated sherds of this pottery type.

It is hard to generalise based only on survey data, and more excavations are needed, but also more surveys in areas that have not been the subject of one, in order to test the theories based on the texts. A better integration of the two datasets is needed for a more complete understanding of past events. In the case of the buffer states, a precise location is difficult to establish without more archaeological work.

<sup>18</sup> ÇİFÇİ 2018, p. 221.

<sup>19</sup> PECORELLA, SALVINI 1984.

<sup>20</sup> PECORELLA, SALVINI 1984, p. 327.

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