

On the origin and meaning of the Assyrian toponym *Tabal*

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Abstract: The toponym *Tabal* was used by the Iron Age Assyrians to refer to a group of Luwian kingdoms and principalities that occupied Cappadocia during the first centuries of the Iron Age. The name itself was not used by the Luwians and it is debated whether or not it was continued in later traditions, such as the Biblical one. It thus seems to be a specific exonym reflecting an Assyrian (and possibly Canaanite) point of view. Nevertheless, an Assyrian etymology has been recently criticized, and few alternative analyses, including a Luwian and a Hurrian one, have been suggested. Admittedly, however, all of these hypotheses present formal and historical unsolved problems. In this paper we will (1) review the reasons why a Hurrian and a Luwian derivation do not hold water; (2) examine the real semantics of the Semitic root **BL* as it appears in Akkadian *tābalu* and *nābalu*; (3) propose an alternative analysis based on the linguistic profile and history of the cultures of Mesopotamia and Syro-Anatolia.

Keywords: *Tabal*, historical geography, Neo-Assyrian, Luwian, Hurrian, language contact

Setting the scene

The word *Tabal* is a geographical name attested in the Neo-Assyrian documentation. It is generally described as referring to Central Anatolia, but this is not unproblematic. Iron Age Assyrians seem to refer to at least three distinct areas of Anatolia in their texts: Cilicia, Melid, and *Tabal*. The first area is quite unproblematic to identify (even though the Assyrian toponomastics is complex even in this case);¹ the second area is also easily identified as the region of modern Malatya, even if in later stages it may have extended to a larger area;² the third area however is foggier, and its extension varied over time. In this short contribution, we will examine two related problems: the origin and meaning of the word *Tabal*, and the identification of the location to which the term *originally* referred.

While the Anatolian interface was not unknown to the rulers of the late Middle Assyrian dynasty during the so-called Dark Age (12th-11th century BC), the first occurrence of the name *Tabal* dates back to the full 9th century, and more precisely to the 22nd year of reign of King Shalmaneser III. Shalmaneser's successors also

¹ Two Assyrian denominations of Cilicia exist: *Que*, roughly corresponding to Central and Eastern Plain Cilicia, and *Hilakku*, corresponding perhaps to the North-Western portion of the plain, corresponding with the Taurus mountain routes towards the Eastern peripheries of the Phrygian territories.

² As pointed out by d'Alfonso (2012: 186f.), at the time of Sargon II, *Tabal* and *Melid* seem to constitute a unitary subset of the Anatolian regions, and, in a later phase, evidence exists that the two areas were at least temporarily conjoined under a unique ruler.

employed the designation, which was still the standard exonym for Central Anatolia when Tiglathpileser III, in the 8th century, turned the Assyrian kingdom into a proper imperial structure. In the 7th century, Tabal is still the name of the areas West of Melid, and the name occurs in annalistic and epistolary documents from the reigns of Sargon II, Esarhaddon, and Assurbanipal.

The exact nature of the political entity that occupied the area has been discussed in literature: was it one large kingdom, a group of federate kingdoms, a ‘cantonal’ system? All these reconstructions are partly correct, and none is entirely exhaustive. The situation was probably fluid and changed over time, and it was perfectly described in the reconstruction proposed by d’Alfonso.³ The exact geographical extension of the area indicated by the name Tabal varied in a parallel fashion: as we will argue, at the time of Shalmaneser the area seems to be restricted to the right bank of the middle course of the Kızılırmak river, from the Kululu-Kayseri area in the North-East to the Bohça-Topada area to the South-West.⁴

In the following sections, we will attempt to explain how the toponym *Tabal* originated, what was the meaning and etymology of the word, based on the assumption that, despite the later semantic extension of the concept of Tabal due to political changes, the problem can be solved by considering the historical context of the mid 9th century, when it was apparently coined.

Tabal and the Τιβαρηνοί

The connection between the reign of Tabal and the Τιβαρηνοί found in the Greek sources has been suggested by Aro,⁵ followed by d’Alfonso,⁶ mostly based on the pairs Μόσχοι and Τιβαρηνοί (Hdt. 3.94; 7.78), Tabal and Muški (Sargon II, Zyl 7a: 15), and Tubal and Mešek (Gen 10.2, 1Chr 1.5, Is 66.19, Ez 27.13, 32.26, 38.2-3, 39.1).

According to d’Alfonso,⁷ there were two different traditions on the Τιβαρηνοί: (1) a ‘western’ tradition, attested by Hekataios, Xenophon, and other ancient authors, according to which the Τιβαρηνοί lived in eastern Paphlagonia, on the coast of the Black Sea, next to the Μοσσύνοικοι; (2) an ‘oriental’ tradition, only emerging in Herodotus (who also knows the ‘western’ one), reflecting the Assyrian connection between Tabal and Muški. Therefore, Herodotus would provide the link between Tabal and the Τιβαρηνοί, although it does not mean that the Τιβαρηνοί of the ‘western’ tradition actually corresponded to the reign of Tabal.

More recently, Simon critically revised the issue about the ethnic and linguistic identity of the Τιβαρηνοί,⁸ also taking into account the suggested link with the toponym Tabal. His counterarguments can be summarised as follows:

³ d’Alfonso 2012: 186f.

⁴ A number of Hieroglyphic Luwian inscriptions from the area exist, which provide an important insight into the history and geography of the region. They do not, however, contain the toponym Tabal, so they do not help shedding light on the synchronical meaning of the Assyrian exonym. For a list of the local inscriptions, cf. Bryce 2012: 141-153.

⁵ Aro 1998: 301.

⁶ d’Alfonso 2012: 185.

⁷ d’Alfonso 2012: 185f.

⁸ Simon 2014.

- 1) the passage in the cylinder inscription of Sargon II runs as follows: KUR *Ur-ar-tu* KUR *Kas-ku* KUR *Ta-ba-lum a-di* KUR *Mu-us-ki*, ‘Urartu, Kasku, Tabal **up to** Muski’. Therefore, Tabal and Muški are not associated with each other, but only represent different points in a geographical description. Similarly, Μόσχοι and Τιβαρηνοί in Herodotus as well as Tubal and Mešek in the Old Testament are listed along with other populations;
- 2) from a geographical point of view, the northern border of Tabal runs very far southwest from the territory of the Τιβαρηνοί, who lived in a Kaškean area, outside the domain of Hittite kings;
- 3) Tabal is an exoethnic name, probably of Assyrian origin (see below), and Greeks should have borrowed it from Assyrians. Were such a borrowing scenario possible, the missing match in the vocalism of the first syllable poses some problems, and the interchange between /l/ and /r/ could only be explained through Luwian rhotacism, but an alleged Luwian intermediation in the borrowing process is very unlikely, since Tabal is not a Luwian self-designation (as shown by Simon 2012, the Luwian name of Tabal was probably Sura, which explains the Greek ethnonym Σύριοι ‘Cappadocians’);
- 4) finally, according to Simon, the Τιβαρηνοί were a Kartvelian population, whose name is related to the city Tipiya, attested in Hittite sources.

Besides the issue of the ethnic identity of the Τιβαρηνοί, which remains highly uncertain due to the lack of convincing data, we agree with Simon that a connection between Tabal and the Τιβαρηνοί poses more problems than it solves, and should therefore be abandoned.

A possible Luwian etymology?

In the end of his paper on Tabal, d’Alfonso,⁹ after having endorsed the Hurrian etymology (see below), envisaged a connection between the toponym Tabal and the Luwian nouns *tapariya-* ‘authority’ and *tapariyalli-* ‘governor’, imagining a dialogue between the Assyrian king and an Aramean merchant, who would have misinterpreted the Luwian title *tapariyalli-* ‘ruler’ – pronounced as [tabarijalli] on account of the so-called Luwian ‘rhotacism’¹⁰ – as *ša Tabāli*. Although such a suggestion is presented as a sort of fictional narrative, the possible Luwian etymology of Tabal and its relationship with the derivatives of the root *tabar-* is worthy of investigation.

According to d’Alfonso,¹¹ the Luwian noun *tapariya-*, originally meaning ‘rule, government’, also came to be used to indicate the territory over which the authority was extended, thus obtaining the meaning of ‘administrative district, province’, just as in the case of the Hittite noun *maniyahhai-*.

However, based on the current documentation, this semantic shift is only attested for Hitt. *maniyahhai-*, as shown by some passages quoted by the CHD (L-N:

⁹ d’Alfonso 2012: 188–191.

¹⁰ Cf. Rieken, Yakubovich 2010.

¹¹ d’Alfonso 2012: 190 with n. 22.

168), e.g. KUB 13.2+ i 22' URU^{DIDL.HI.A} BÀD-kán ku-i-e-eš **ma-ni-ya-ah-hi-ya** an-da ..., 'the fortified towns that are in the province, ...' (CTH 261.I.B, MH/NS). Conversely, the Luwian noun *tapariya-* always means 'authority, command', and, as far as we know, it was never used to denote an administrative district, both in cuneiform and hieroglyphic sources.¹² We are listing here all the occurrences we have been able to find:¹³

a) Cuneiform sources

- (1) KBo 3.4+ (CTH 61.I.A, NH/NS; Annals of Muršili II)
 iii 77 hu-u-da-a-ak ma-ah-ha-an I-NA URUGa-aš-ga Ú-UL ŠA 1^{EN} **ta-pa-ri-ya-aš**
 iii 78 e-eš-ta
 'Suddenly, when among the Kaška there was no **government** by one person, ...'.
- (2) KUB 14.7+ (CTH 383.1, NH/LNS; Prayer of Hattušili III and Puduhepa)
 i 35 [... **ta-pa-r**]i-ya Ú-UL an-da e-šu-un
 'I was not involved [in the ord]er [...]'.
 (3) KUB 14.7+
 i 7' **ta-pa-ri-ya** DINGIR^{MEŠ}-aš ar-n[u-um-ma-aš Ú-UL an-da]
 i 8' e-šu-un
 '[...] I was [not] involved **in the order** of the tra[nsfer] of the deities'.
 (4) KUB 14.7+
 i 14' ... nu-za-kán a-pé-e-da-[ni-ya?]
 i 15' **ta-pa-ri-ya** Ú-UL ku-it-ki an-da [e-šu-un]
 '(He also t[ook] silver and gold of all the deities. And to which deity he gave silver and gold of each), I [was not involved] **in that order** in any way'.
 (5) KUB 14.7+
 ii 7 ... am-me-el-ma KAXU-aš
 ii 8 me-mi-ya-ni-it **ta-pár-ri-ya-az** Ú-UL
 ii 9 ku-iš-ki har-^rak^r-ta
 'Nobody perished by the word of my mouth (and) **by my order**'.
 (6) KUB 26.1+ (CTH 255.2.A, NH/NS; Instructions of Tutḫaliya IV)
 iii 32 na-aš-ma šu-um-ma-aš ku-it LÚ^{MEŠ} SAG x[...]
 iii 33 IT-TI DUMU^{MEŠ} LUGAL BE-LU^{HL.A} A-NA INIM a-ra-ah-zé-na-aš
 iii 34 ^rta^r-**pár-ri-ya** GAM-an u-i-iš-ke-mi

¹² See now also Starke 2019: 612f.

¹³ We do not take into account the unclear LEPUS+ra/i-ia-sa /tabarijas/ in KARKAMIŠ A23 2 § a (Hawkins 2000: 119) and BOROWSKI 2 l.1 (Hawkins 2000: 558), explained as a nom.sg. by Yakubovich (*Annotated Corpus of Luwian Texts*), with the meaning 'commander'.

- ‘Or, since I am sending you courtiers [...] along with princes (and) lords **with authority** on an issue of foreign affairs, ...’.
- (7) KBo 18.88 (CTH 209, NS; Letter fragment)
 rev. 16’ [...]x-an-wa ^mTal-m[i]-la-aš
 rev. 17’ [...] **t]a-pa-ri-ya-an**
 rev. 18’ [...]x
 ‘[...] ... Talm[i]la [...] **a]uthority** (acc.sg. or ptc.?) [...]’.
- (8) KBo 40.13 (CTH 212.12, NS; Treaty or Instructions)
 obv. 4’ ... **ta-pár-ri-an** TÀŠ-PUR
 ‘You have sent **the order**’.
- (9) KUB 24.7 (CTH 363.1, NS; The Sun-god, the Cow, and the Fisherman)
 iv 49’ ... **ta-pa-ri-ya-za-ma**
 iv 50’ [pa]-ra-a kar-ša-an har-zi
 ‘She has cut (herself) off **from command(ing others)**’.¹⁴
- (10) KUB 5.1+ (CTH 561, LNS; Oracle concerning campaigns in the Kaška region)
 iii 93 i-wa-ar ^mTe-me-et-ti **ta-pár-ri-aš** IŠ-TU DINGIR^{LIM} mar-ᵏki-an-za NU.SIG₅-
 du
 ‘(If) **the command** in the fashion of Temeti is rejected by the deity, let (the oracle) be unfavourable!’.
- (11) KUB 16.40 (CTH 576.1.A, LNS; Oracle *šumma immeru*)
 rev.⁷ 15 **ta-pár-ya-aš-ma-ká[n ...]**
 ‘**The authority** [...]’.

b) Hieroglyphic inscriptions

- (12) KARKAMIŠ stone bowl¹⁵
 § 1 za-ha-wa/i (*522)hu-ri+i-na (DEUS)ku+AVIS-pa-pa-si-na EGO i-ia+ra/i-ri+i-sa
 (“PURUS”)ku-ma-ni-ha (DEUS)ku+AVIS-pa-pa-sa-ti-i (DEUS)ka+ra/i-hu-ha-sa-ti
(LIGNUM)ta-pa+ra/i-a-ti
 ‘I, Yariris, consecrated this libation vessel of Kubaba **by the authority** of Kubaba and Karhuha’.
- (13) MARAŞ 1¹⁶
 § 5 |“SOLIUM”(–)x-ma-ma-pa-wa/i (BONUS)u-su-tara/i-ha (DEUS)TONITRUS-
 hu-ta-sá-ti-i (DEUS)i-ia-sa-ti-ha **LEPUS+ra/i-ia-ti**
 ‘and I improved the settlements **by the authority** of Tarhunza and Ea’.

¹⁴ Translation according to Hoffner 1998: 87.

¹⁵ Hawkins 2000: 139.

¹⁶ Hawkins 2000: 263.

- (14) IZGIN 1¹⁷
 § 9 (A) PITHOS.GRYLLUS-*pa-wa/i-mi*||((URBS) *mi-ia-ti-*' **LEPUS+RA/I-ti** (B) *há-sa²-tara/i-ti-ha*
 'and I *hastarrati*-ed the city PITHOS.GRYLLUS **by my authority**'.
- (15) IZGIN 1¹⁸
 § 16 (A)]||-*ru-tá á-zi-ia-ti* **LEPUS+RA/I-ti**
 '[...] he/they [...]ed **by our authority**'.
- (16) SULTANHAN¹⁹
 § 41 |*á-pi-i-wa/i-tà-*' |REX-*ti-ia-ri+i* |**LEPUS+ra/i-ia-ti-i** |*i-zi-ia-mi-na-*'
 'We shall requite them **by the authority** of the king'.
- (17) KÖRKÜN²⁰
 § 3 *wa/i-mu-ta* |*á-mi-ti* "COR"-*na-ti* ("COR")*ha-pa-zú+ra/i-wa/i-ti* DOMINUS-*na-sa ha-ti-sá* |NEG«₂» || |*ma-nu-ha* |*zi-la* ("PES")*hi-nu-ha* |(DEUS)*ku+AVIS-pa-pa-sa-ti* |**LEPUS+ra/i-ia-ti** |TONITRUS-*hu-ta-sa-ti-ha*
 'I myself did not then move anyhow the lord's command from my loyal soul **by the authority** of Kubaba and Tarhunza'.
- (18) BOROWSKI 3²¹
 § 5 *a-<wa/i>* |*za-a-na* |URBS+*MI-ni-na* |*ha-ru-ha-na*(URBS) (DEUS)TONITRUS-*ti-i* |**ta-LEPUS+ra/i-ia-ti** |AEDIFICARE-*ha*
 'I built this city Haruha **by the authority** of Tarhunza'.
- (19) GELB²²
 § 1] DEUS-*ní-sa-ti-i* LEP[US ||
 '[...] by divine **auth[ority ...]**'.

Therefore, the Assyrian misinterpretation of Luw. *tapariyalli* as *ša Tabāli* envisaged by d'Alfonso²³ remains theoretically possible, but there is no evidence so far that Luw. *tapariya-* referred to an administrative district, which would be needed in order to link the toponym Tabal to a derivative of the Luwian root *tapar-*. Furthermore, more in general, no derivative of this Luwian root attested so far refers to a piece of land, as shown in Table 1.²⁴

Although the Luwian solution suggested by d'Alfonso is unlikely, an Anatolian explanation may still remain available. According to Starke,²⁵ Tabal may be connected

¹⁷ Hawkins 2000: 315.

¹⁸ Hawkins 2000: 316.

¹⁹ Hawkins 2000: 467.

²⁰ Hawkins 2000: 172.

²¹ Hawkins 2000: 231.

²² Hawkins 2000: 568.

²³ d'Alfonso 2012.

²⁴ Data come from Melchert 1993 and the online *Annotated Corpus of Luwian Texts* by Yakubovich.

²⁵ Starke 2019: 613.

Cuneiform (mostly in Hitt. context)	Hieroglyphic
(:) <i>tapar</i> - v. ‘rule, govern’	<i>tabari(ya)</i> - v. ‘rule’
<i>tapar(r)iya</i> - v. ‘rule, govern’	<i>tabariya</i> - n. ‘command, authority’
<i>tapar(r)iya</i> - n. ‘authority, command’	<i>tabariya</i> - n. ‘commander’ (?)
^{LÚ} <i>tapariyalli</i> - n. ‘ruler, governor’	<i>tabaritta</i> - n. ‘authority’
^{LÚ} <i>tapariyašši</i> - n. ‘ruler, governor’	<i>tabarihi(d)</i> - n. ‘command’
<i>taparamman</i> - a. ‘ruling, governing’	<i>tabariyall(i)</i> - n. ‘governor’
<i>:taparammahit</i> - n. ‘position of ruling’	<i>tabariyalli(ya)</i> - a. ‘governor’s’
[<i>tabarna</i> - n. royal title]	<i>tabariyalla</i> - v. ‘make/become governor’
[<i>taparu</i> - n. ‘manipulation’ (?)]	

Table 1.

with other Anatolian toponyms, particularly with the Lydian city name $\tau\alpha\beta\alpha\lambda\alpha$ (modern Davala)²⁶ and the Hittite mount name *Ta-pa(-a)-la*.²⁷ However, while the phonetic match is striking, such a solution is also problematic: besides the geographical distance, which would obviously rather point to a case of homonymy, at least as far as the Lydian city is concerned (the location of mount Tapala is unknown), as far as we know, the etymology of the city name $\tau\alpha\beta\alpha\lambda\alpha$ is not clear, and therefore it cannot be taken for granted that it is Anatolian.

More generally, it seems quite bizarre that an Anatolian – i.e. endoethnic – designation never occurs in the local documentation in Luwian language, but it is consistently found in Assyrian sources.

Tabal and Hurrian

We will now briefly consider whether a Hurrian origin is probable, particularly a connection with the profession name *tabli* / *tabrenni* / *taballi* ‘smith’, ultimately with the root *tab-* ‘fuse’, ‘melt’, ‘merge’. D’Alfonso²⁸ already mentioned a number of difficulties in the hypothesis of a Hurrian origin.²⁹ A few more difficulties will be pointed out here.

Toponyms of Hurrian origin are morphologically and etymologically less understood than anthroponyms. Typical known constructions involve a genitive from proper names or profession names, e.g. (especially from Nuzi):³⁰

²⁶ Cf. Zgusta 1984: 594.

²⁷ Cf. Del Monte, Tischler 1978: 397. Also note the existence of other similar, possibly related toponyms, e.g. ^{HUR.SAG}*Tapalhunuwa*, ^{URU}*Tapalga*, and ^{URU}*Tapālupa*.

²⁸ D’Alfonso 2012: 187f., with references.

²⁹ ‘This reconstruction too, however, presents some problems. The first concerns the form *tabali* itself, which is neither a plain/absolute form (which would be *tabli*), nor an adjectival or genitive form, as it would be expected for a meaning like “land of the smith”. In my opinion, the most difficult problem is to admit that the Assyrians would have adopted a Hurrian term in the 9th century BC for designating Central Anatolia’ (d’Alfonso 2012: 187).

³⁰ Cf. Wilhelm 1998: 126b; Giorgieri 2000b: 295.

a) *Unapšewe* < *Unapše* (Hurrian personal name) + gen. ending =*ve*, '(town) of Unapše'; *Irēm-adadwe*, '(town) of Irēm-adad' (Akkadian personal name); ^{URU}*Havorneve* (Richter 2016: 410 fn. 307), perhaps ^{URU}*Haluleve*.³¹

Of particular interest are those place names that derive from a professional name, such as:

b) *Zipuhuliwe* (morphologically a profession name, meaning unknown) with a suffixal complex -*o=ġ(e)=o=li* and the suffix of the genitive =*ve*; *Pahharra(swe)*, '(town) of the potter'; *haštar(i)=re(<ne)=ve*^{K1}, 'town of the *haštari*'.³²

Taking this last example as a probable model for other toponyms with an etymological connection with a profession name, one should expect to find in *Tabal* a similar morphology, with a suffixal chain at least comparable, if not identical. For sure the word *taballiš* attested in the *song of release*³³ is no solid comparandum: from *taballiš*, i.e. *tab(a)l(i)=le(<ne)=š* we should expect **tab(a)l(i)=le(<ne)=ve* '(place) of the smith'. But in *Tabal* we could hardly recognize the root and the scant rest of some eroded suffix. We do have Hurrian toponyms ending in *-al*, but probably involving an element *-šal*: e.g. *Apišal*, *Hubšal* etc.³⁴

Tabal as a truly Assyrian word

Both the Luwian and the Hurrian etymologies present weaknesses. The Luwian one remains theoretically possible, but the historical scenario proposed by d'Alfonso (2012) is highly peculiar and speculative, nor is the Luwian word *tapariya-* really connected, in the available occurrences, with the semantic field of the 'administrative district'. The Hurrian one, on the other hand, seems not only historically unconvincing, but also formally unsupportable.

It is therefore time to go back to consider the easiest possible explanation: can *Tabal* simply be an Assyrian word? This hypothesis is dismissed by d'Alfonso,³⁵ who states that '*Tābalu* [...] means "dry land", which is not a definition of the Anatolian Plateau one might expect from people familiar with the North Mesopotamian steppe and the Syrian and Arabic deserts'. The objection appears very sensible, but in order to validate it we now need to check the meaning of the word *tābalu* in Akkadian, which cannot be treated separately from the two words that are etymologically connected with it: the verb *abālu* and the substantive *nābalu*.

³¹ Richter 2016: 406. Similar forms from common names: Giorgieri 2000b: 295.

³² Cf. Richter 2016: 412, n. 315.

³³ KBo 32.14 i 42: *tab(a)l(i)=le(<ne)=ž*, transitive subject in ergative case. However after a few lines we find *tabrenni*, i 50, *tab(=i)=re=nni*, followed by a gerundial form *ḥažimāi* (i 50) 'while listening', and probably subject of the verbal form *pāru*, *par/far=u*, likely an intransitive construction with an unclear suffix =*u* (Giorgieri 2000a: 228; Campbell 2020: 214). Again *tabrenni* in i 52, subject of the antipassive (old Hurrian) forms *aluib*, *al(=)u=i=b*, and *ḥilib*, *ḥil=i=b*, both meaning 'say', 'speak' ('spoke to himself and said').

³⁴ Richter 2016: 373f.

³⁵ d'Alfonso 2012: 187.

The verb *abālu*, not to be confused with *babālu/wabālu* (which corresponds to Hebrew יבַל *yabal*), may be a I-א₁₋₂ weak verb, at least judging from the attested forms. Its meaning is ‘dry out’ and, according to the occurrences attested in the CAD (A, s.v.), it can be said of canals, marshes, and, figuratively, of plants and body parts. Reference to famine and aridity are indeed attested, as for instance in the omen YOS 10, 44:45:³⁶

appārātum i-ba-la hušahhu ina mātīm ibbašši
‘the marshes will dry out and there will be hunger in the land’.

So far, so good. One may very well assume that, if the meaning of the derived nouns had perfectly matching semantics, the observation made by d’Alfonso would be absolutely fitting.

The two derived nouns, however, underwent some semantic changes – which is not an exception in the way semantic fields are organized after derivation – therefore it is necessary to examine their actual contextual meaning, too.

The formations are very much parallel. *Nābalu* is a *nāprasu*-build (which is pretty rare in Akkadian) while *tābalu* is a (very standard) *tāprasu*-build.

Nābalu means ‘dry land’. In some of its occurrences, a connection with the semantic fields of drought and aridity does exist. Consider for instance TCL 3 ii 84:³⁷

ālānišunu umaššeruma ina na-ba-li ašar šumāmi madbariš innabtu
‘They left their cities and fled to the *n.*, a place of thirst into the desert’.

The occurrences that present this meaning are, however, few (cf. CAD N, s.v.). More often it simply means ‘land’ as opposed to ‘water’, or ‘mainland’, or ‘river bank’. In these cases, there is no connotation of aridity. One may consider the triadic distinction in *Asb.* 8 i 69:³⁸

šarrāni ša ahi tâmti qabal tâmti u na-ba-li
‘kings of the seashore, of the islands, and of the mainland’.

Coming to the meaning of *tābalu*, the situation is even more interesting. The occurrences seem to have only the meaning ‘land’ as opposed to a body of water, without any connotation of ‘aridity’ or ‘drought’. It can be generally opposed to any body of water, as in the *Dreambook* (330 rev. ii 57):³⁹

ina nāri mē u ta-ba-li
‘in a canal/river, in water or on the land’.

³⁶ Winitzer 2017: 353.

³⁷ Sargon II, 8th campaign. Based on the reconstruction by Zimansky (1990: 15f.), the events take place in the plain of Khoy, in ancient Urartu. Interesting, the area is not a desertic one, so the description given by Sargon must be taken as a literary topos rather than as a proper description of the landscape.

³⁸ Egyptian campaign by Assurbanipal, now published as RINAP 5.11 i 69.

³⁹ In IM 67692, 131 the opposition is specifically to a channel, and it indicates the bank of the river or channel.

The word *tābalu* is also borrowed by other Semitic languages. It occurs in Hebrew and in Aramaic as בתל. In the Hebrew bible, it always indicates the ‘inhabited world’,⁴⁰ and the Greek translation is, generally, οἰκουμένη. In Aramaic, we have לבתא in Egyptian Aramaic (e.g. Arsham’s letter A6.2),⁴¹ where it means the shore as opposed to a body of water, and we have בתל in the Qumran Targum to the book of Job (29.3 = Job 37.12), where it indicates the surface of the Earth excluding the sea. The meanings are consistent with those of Akkadian *tābalu*, and no connotation exists as regards ‘aridity’ or ‘drought’.

It seems reasonable to observe that, based on this situation and meanings, there is no need to think that the Assyrians would have used the word *tābalu* to indicate an arid region. As a matter of fact, the word seems to indicate either the ‘mainland’ (as opposed to the sea or to the islands) or the ‘bank’ or ‘shore’ of a body of water. It is therefore necessary to find out if either of these two meanings would have been a fitting description of the first region Shalmaneser III referred to by the name Tabal.

As previously stated, the word seems to be used first by Shalmaneser referring to his campaign of the 22nd year.

RIMA A.0.102.16 162-166⁴²

In my twenty-second regnal year I crossed the Euphrates for the twenty-second time (and) received tribute from all the kings of the land Hatti. Moving on from the land Hatti I crossed Mount [...]inzini (and) received tribute from the people of the land Melid. I crossed Mount Timur (and) went down to the cities of Tuatti, the Tabalite. I razed, destroyed, (and) burned their cities. (Translation by Grayson)

The trajectory of the campaign is very clear. The Assyrian king is fighting in the Euphrates, moving more or less upstream to the land of Malatya. Here he turns to the West, crosses a mountain that was probably located in the Tahtalı mountain range,⁴³ and reaches the Kululu-Kayseri area, to which it refers, finally, using the new toponym Tabal. Is it reasonable to hypothesize that he did so in order to call this region ‘the Mainland’? We find this unlikely, because he was not coming from a coastal area (as some of his successors will do, moving northwards from Cilicia).

It is, on the other hand, the second possible meaning of the word that appears more promising to us. Would Shalmaneser describe this new political area as a ‘River-bank’? While it is true that none of the main sites in which hieroglyphic inscriptions connected to the Tabal are properly located on the very bank of the river, at least not in a Mesopotamian fashion, the collocation of the core area to which Shalmaneser refers to in his annals generally corresponds to the Southern bank of the Kızılırmak:

⁴⁰ 1 Samuel 2.8; 2 Samuel 22.16; 1 Chronicles 16.30; Job 18.18, 34.13, 37.12; Psalm 9.8, 18.15, 19.4, 24.1; 33.8, 50.12, 77.18, 89.11, 90.2, 93.1, 96.10-13, 97.4, 98.7-9; Proverbs 8.26-31; Isaiah 13.11, 14.17, 14.21, 18.3, 24.4, 26.9, 26.18, 27.6, 34.1; Jeremiah 10.12, 51.15; Lamentations 4.1; Nahum 1.5.

⁴¹ Porten, Yardeni 1986: 96f.

⁴² Text and translation in Grayson 1996: 79.

⁴³ The Timur mountain mentioned here has no connection with the city of Timur in the land of Que in Cilicia, cf. Yamada 2000: fn. 488.

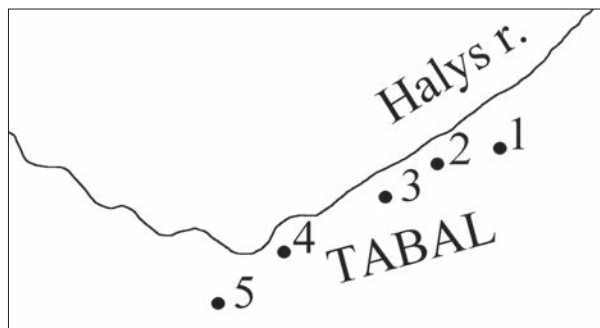


Figure 1. Tabal proper, detail from Bryce 2013: 140, Map 4.

The sites in the small map, a detail from the one by Bryce,⁴⁴ are: 1. Kululu, 2. Sultanhan, 3. Kayseri, 4. Bohça and 5. Topada. Because the river represents a very typical and topical symbolic ‘boundary’ in the Mesopotamian traditions,⁴⁵ and because the proper crossing of the Kızılırmak would not occur until later in the Assyrian history,⁴⁶ it appears reasonable to think that the region would have been labelled by the Assyrians, due to this geographical feature, as ‘the River-Bank’.

The later extension of this very designation to further zones as described by d’Alfonso⁴⁷ may have simply depended on the political expansion of the main power(s) of the area and, in a parallel fashion, on the intensification of the Assyrian activities in the Anatolian interface regions during the mature phases of the imperial history.

Conclusion

In this paper, we reviewed the proposals to analyze the Assyrian toponym Tabal as a loan from a language different to Akkadian, and we tried to show that a Luwian etymology, while formally possible and sociolinguistically conceivable, is not based on solid contextual evidence, while a Hurrian one is both formally and historically undefendable. We also reviewed the traditional coupling of the word Tabal with other designation in Biblical and classical sources, generally confirming the results by Simon.⁴⁸ Finally, we attempted to provide an explanation, according to which Tabal would in fact be a genuine Akkadian word, with the meaning ‘river-bank’, and it would have been used by Shalmaneser to indicate the area close to the bank of the Kızılırmak he reached after arriving in Anatolia from Melid, crossing the Tahtalı range in the 22nd year of his reign. This hypothesis remains, admittedly, speculative, but it seems to us that it is linguistically, historically, and geographically fitter than the other explanations offered in the literature.

⁴⁴ Bryce 2012: 140, map 4.

⁴⁵ I wish to thank Mary Bachvarova (*pers. comm.*) for pointing out to me the relevance, in this scenario, of the symbolic value of the body of water as a boundary.

⁴⁶ Bryce 2012: 238–240.

⁴⁷ d’Alfonso 2012: 186f.

⁴⁸ Simon 2012; *idem* 2014.

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