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Cedar Tree in Assyrian Reliefs

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of cedar and timber acquisition in Assyrian royal discourse and visual culture, with particular attention to the Neo-Assyrian period. It considers how a valuable building material could become a sign of royal provision, access to distant landscapes, and participation in imperial networks. The method is an interpretive comparison of published royal inscriptions, museum catalogue records, and scholarship on Assyrian narrative art. Earlier Assyrian references and the cedar-forest episode in the Epic of Gilgamesh provide historical and literary context, but are distinguished from Neo-Assyrian visual evidence. The principal case studies are the bronze bands from the gates of Shalmaneser III at Balawat and the timber-transport reliefs from Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad. The analysis separates depictions of tribute from scenes explicitly identified as timber transport and distinguishes physical cedar construction from the representation of trees or wooden cargo. It also corrects the identification of the Louvre timber-transport series as AO 19889–AO 19891 rather than AO 19885. The evidence supports interpreting timber procurement as part of the visual presentation of royal accomplishment, while not establishing that every depicted tree is cedar, every shipment originated in Lebanon, or every coastal polity was under continuous direct administration. Texts concerning Sennacherib and Esarhaddon further contextualise the relationship between construction, tribute, and coercion without supplying a secure identification for every proposed relief scene. Six illustration positions are retained, but the image files were not supplied and require verification before publication. The study concludes that cedar's political significance arose through the interaction of material value, architectural use, royal narrative, and the selective visual organisation of movement and labour.

Keywords: Neo-Assyrian art; cedar; timber transport; Balawat Gates; Khorsabad; royal inscriptions; Phoenician coast

1. INTRODUCTION

Cedar occupied an important position in Assyrian royal accounts of construction and resource acquisition. Long-distance timber procurement linked building projects in Mesopotamia with mountain environments, coastal communities, and transport networks beyond the principal Assyrian centres. In monumental art, such connections could be represented through ships, cargo, labour, landscape, and the reception of tribute. The resulting images were selective statements about royal achievement rather than neutral illustrations of economic activity. Winter's study of narrative and royal rhetoric provides a useful basis for examining that distinction [1]. The present paper therefore treats the representation of cedar as a problem involving both material history and the construction of political meaning.

The subject requires several qualifications. Cedar named in an inscription, timber represented on a relief, and a stylised tree in a ceremonial composition are not interchangeable kinds of evidence. A text may identify a material without describing a surviving image, while a relief may show long wooden elements without specifying their species. Similarly, a palace constructed with imported timber does not necessarily present a depiction of a cedar forest on its walls. Museum catalogues and critical editions help establish these distinctions, while broader studies of Near Eastern exchange locate royal imagery within networks involving warfare, tribute, craftsmanship, and maritime trade [2]. These distinctions prevent a general interest in cedar from becoming an unsupported botanical identification of all represented trees.

The paper asks how royal inscriptions and selected objects connect timber procurement with the presentation of Assyrian authority. It concentrates on the Balawat bronze bands and the Khorsabad timber-transport reliefs, with earlier textual traditions and later royal accounts used for comparison. It does not attempt to identify the first appearance of cedar in all Assyrian art or to reconstruct a continuous sequence of surviving cedar images for every reign. Instead, it examines the relationship between documented materials, visual organisation, and royal claims. The argument is that timber acquisition could become a visible expression of royal provision and access to distant resources, while the extent and stability of actual political control must be evaluated separately.

2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

The study uses published editions of Assyrian royal inscriptions, a critical edition of the Gilgamesh tradition, museum object records, and scholarship on Assyrian art. Earlier inscriptions are distinguished from the Neo-Assyrian material by chronology. The main textual reference series are the *Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia: Assyrian Periods* (RIMA) and the *Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period* (RINAP). Individual volumes cover different periods and rulers; references to one series cannot be substituted indiscriminately for another. The analysis gives priority to an inscription's identified ruler and textual context rather than attaching general historical claims to a convenient volume title.

Three analytical operations guide the comparison. First, the relevant text or object is identified by its publication, museum number, and attributed date or reign. Second, material descriptions and identifiable actions are separated from interpretation: a boat carrying timber is an observable or catalogued subject, whereas the proposition that it asserts comprehensive maritime sovereignty is an analytical claim. Third, the relationship between texts and images is evaluated without assuming that a particular relief illustrates a particular campaign. A shared theme of western resources may justify comparison, but does not establish a direct correspondence between an annalistic passage and an individual carved scene.

The visual case studies rely on published catalogue identifications. No botanical examination of wood, new archaeological excavation, or direct technical examination of the reliefs was undertaken for this paper. The six image files named in the supplied manuscript were not attached, so the revised source retains their positions with explicit missing-image notices. Figure 1 is intended to locate Balawat; Figure 2 concerns the gates; Figure 3 concerns maritime tribute; and Figure 4 remains unidentified because it originally lacked a caption. Figure 5 is reserved for the Khorsabad timber-transport series. Figure 6, identified in the supplied caption with Nebuchadnezzar II at Nahr al-Kalb, is a Neo-Babylonian comparison rather than evidence from an Assyrian reign. Image-specific details, credits, and permissions must be confirmed before these illustration slots are used in a final publication.

This approach supports a bounded interpretation of the selected evidence. It does not establish the proportion of Assyrian timber obtained from any particular region, the volume of maritime shipments, or the reception of palace imagery by all visitors. Nor does it treat a royal inscription as an administrative inventory whose claims can be accepted without qualification. The principal purpose is to examine how the acquisition and movement of a prestigious material were organised within royal narratives and monumental settings. The distinction between description, contextual comparison, and interpretation remains central throughout the discussion.

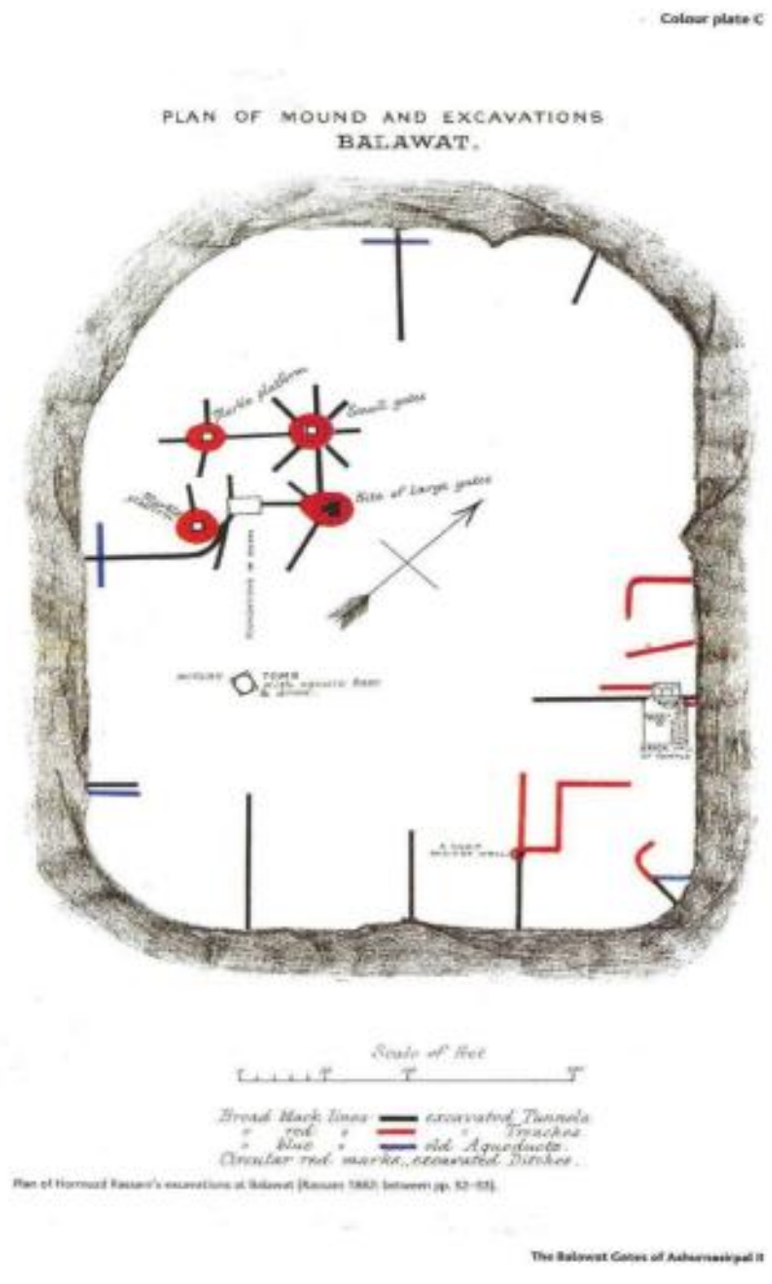


Figure 1. *Location of Balawat (ancient Imgur-Enlil) in northern Iraq. The map file and its cartographic source were not supplied.*

3. HISTORICAL AND MATERIAL CONTEXT

3.1. LITERARY TRADITIONS AND EARLIER ASSYRIAN EVIDENCE

The cedar forest in the Epic of Gilgamesh supplies an important literary context for the relationship between timber, distant landscapes, danger, and heroic action. The relevant forest narrative belongs principally to Tablets IV–V of the Standard Babylonian epic, not Tablet XI, which contains the Flood Story. George's critical edition provides the appropriate textual reference [3]. The existence of Gilgamesh manuscripts in Ashurbanipal's library demonstrates the transmission of an older literary tradition in a seventh-century setting. It does not date the origin of cedar symbolism to that library, prove that Assyrian artists invented the forest motif, or identify a corresponding relief as an illustration of the epic.

Literary landscapes must also be distinguished from fixed geographical descriptions. The cedar forest's narrative significance does not, by itself, establish that every version refers to the same location or that every tree in a royal landscape represents a Lebanese cedar. The present comparison therefore concerns an association between prestigious timber and the traversal of a distant environment rather than a demonstrated line of descent from one epic passage to one monumental image. The distinction preserves the relevance of literary evidence while avoiding the assumption that mythological and

royal visual traditions convey an identical message.

Shamshi-Adad I belongs to the early second millennium BCE and therefore predates the Neo-Assyrian period by many centuries. His building inscriptions, published within RIMA 1, provide an earlier textual context for royal provision of valued construction materials [4]. They should not be presented as a reign within a sequence of Neo-Assyrian wall reliefs. The importance of this earlier evidence lies in the established association between kingship, building, and the acquisition of exceptional materials, rather than in an unsupported claim that it records the first artistic depiction of cedar.

Tiglath-pileser I, conventionally dated 1114–1076 BCE in the inscriptional chronology used here, is treated in RIMA 2 [5]. His accounts connect military reach, construction, and the movement of trees into royal environments. They provide a further precedent for representing access to distant resources as an accomplishment of kingship. Such statements concern royal claims and the textual presentation of landscape transformation; they do not supply direct evidence for a surviving cedar-transport relief of that reign. Earlier textual traditions are consequently retained as historical background rather than incorporated into an uninterrupted visual chronology.

The Akkadian term commonly transliterated *erēnu* is relevant to discussions of cedar in royal building texts. However, a determinative marking wood or a tree in a cuneiform spelling is not an independent botanical test of the species depicted on an adjacent or unrelated relief. The meaning of a written term depends on its linguistic and textual context. A contrast between visually similar transliterations cannot establish the identity of trees on palace walls without secure linguistic and object-specific evidence. Where an image lacks an identifying caption or a secure catalogue attribution, the analysis must state its uncertainty rather than convert an orthographic observation into a species identification.

3.2. ARCHITECTURE, TIMBER SUPPLY, AND IMPERIAL CLAIMS

Cedar's architectural importance helps explain why its procurement could receive attention in royal texts. Large roof beams, doors, and other prominent wooden elements formed part of building programmes through which rulers presented themselves as providers and restorers. However, the specific material of a gate leaf, column, roof, or metal fitting must be established for the building under discussion. Evidence that one structure used cedar cannot be extended automatically to all palaces or ceremonial entrances. The royal inscription editions provide the appropriate basis for evaluating particular construction claims, while museum records identify surviving fittings and reliefs.

Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) and Shalmaneser III (858–824 BCE) belong to the principal ninth-century context discussed here. Their inscriptions connect western campaigning and royal construction with access to materials and tribute [5, 6]. This evidence supports examination of timber as part of a wider presentation of abundance. It does not justify assigning a precise date of 865 BCE to an unidentified Nimrud procession or identifying every object carried by a delegation as a cedar trunk. A relief's provenance, catalogue number, and depicted objects must be established independently before its narrative can be linked to a particular passage.

The same caution applies to the relationship between tribute and administrative integration. Shalmaneser III's accounts of western campaigns, including the Battle of Qarqar in 853 BCE, belong within a history of military confrontation and negotiated or imposed obligations [6]. The conflict cannot be reduced to a securely demonstrated collective defence of cedar commerce alone. Adad-nerari III's western claims likewise indicate royal demands and political relationships, but tribute lists do not establish that coastal cities were controlled without military pressure or that timber was publicly marketed as a distinct royal display. Such propositions would require evidence beyond a general description of tribute.

For Tiglath-pileser III, the appropriate principal edition is RINAP 1, not RIMA 3 [7]. This correction matters because the volumes have different chronological boundaries. The texts concerning his building programme and western relationships provide a basis for discussing a cedar palace and the incorporation of selected regions into Assyrian structures. They do not show that every coastal kingdom or every cedar-producing district was administered in the same way. References to named rulers, tribute obligations, and annexations therefore need to be evaluated passage by passage rather than combined into a uniform model of permanent control over the whole Levantine coast.

Sargon II's inscriptions are edited in RINAP 2 [8]. They provide the textual setting for a reign whose palace at Dur-Sharrukin is central to the visual analysis below. Royal building language connects selected materials and distant regions with the achievement of the ruler, but the named materials should not be conflated. Cedar, boxwood, ebony, and ivory are not interchangeable objects of procurement, and timber terminology does not establish the material composition of unrelated furniture or writing boards. The present argument therefore concentrates on the documented timber-transport imagery instead of treating every luxury material mentioned in the inscriptions as evidence for cedar.

Geographical precision is equally important. References to western mountains cannot all be translated into exclusive dependence on Mount Lebanon. Sennacherib's building texts, for example, include cedar from Mount Amanus, demonstrating that the geography of procurement must remain sensitive to the particular inscription [9]. The significance of Lebanon in Assyrian western relations should therefore be assessed alongside other source regions. This qualification changes the argument from a claim of exclusive control over one forest to an examination of how access to distant building resources was incorporated into royal self-presentation.

4. VISUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. BALAWAT: BRONZE BANDS, TRIBUTE, AND MARITIME MOVEMENT

Balawat, ancient Imgur-Enlil, provides a particularly important setting for examining the relationship between monumental construction and narrative metalwork. The surviving bronze bands associated with the gates of Shalmaneser III carry embossed and engraved scenes arranged in registers. King's catalogue remains a foundational publication of the material, although its historical title uses an older royal chronology [10]. The gate assemblages should not be described collectively as having a single identical provenance or as illustrating one event in 849 BCE. Their attribution, original arrangement, and represented episodes require attention at the level of individual bands.

The distinction between construction material and depicted subject is especially useful here. The British Museum's presentation describes cedar gate components and explains that the wooden structure had decayed, leaving the bronze decoration [11]. Cedar was therefore relevant to the physical monument itself. That fact does not mean that every scene on its bands depicts cedar forests or that every object carried by a tributary figure is a tree trunk. The visual programme encompasses campaigning, tribute, and other royal activities, whose subjects must be identified from their particular scenes and inscriptions.

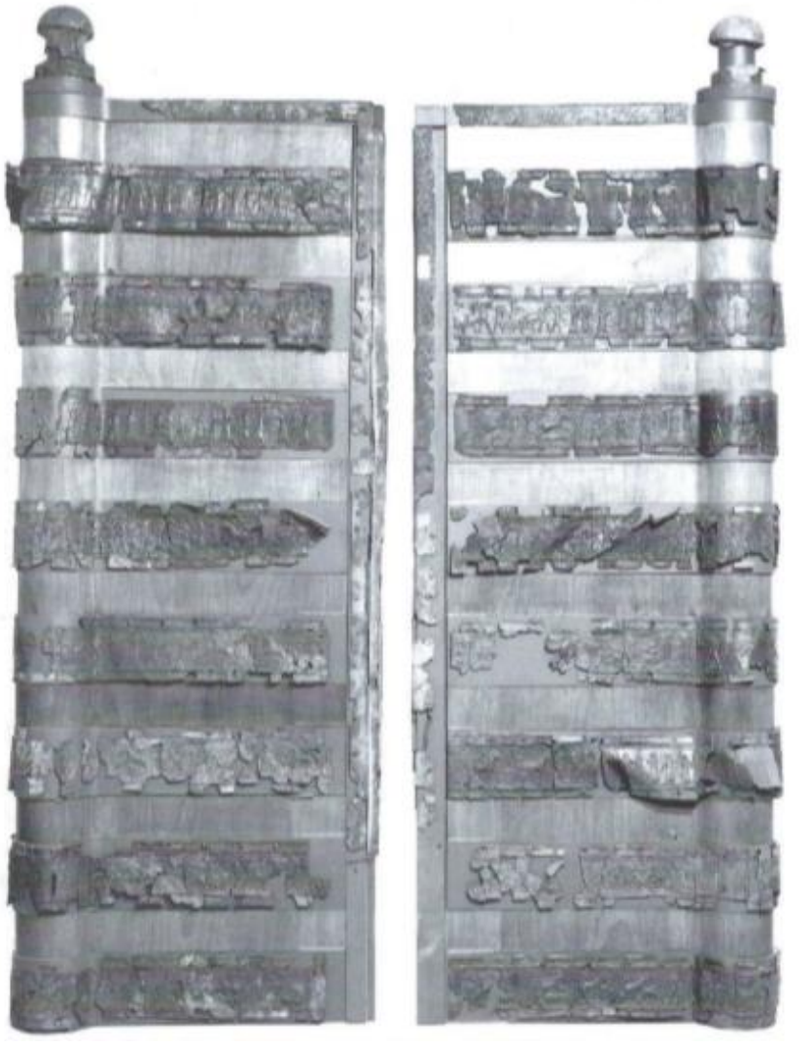


Figure 2. *Balawat gate assemblage or reconstruction: identification of the illustrated object and its image credit remain to be confirmed.*

A geographical illustration may help readers locate Balawat in relation to the Assyrian heartland, but a modern map is supporting documentation rather than ancient evidence. Figure 1 retains the supplied map position, with its cartographic source and actual content still requiring verification. Figure 2 retains the position for an illustration of the gates; the final caption should distinguish a surviving bronze band from a modern reconstruction of the wooden doors. This distinction is

essential because a reconstructed gate presents an interpretation of an ancient assemblage rather than an intact surviving wooden monument.

The bronze band registered as Rm.1041 offers a securely identifiable example. Its upper register concerns tribute from Tyre and Sidon, while the lower register concerns the capture of Hazazu [12]. This juxtaposition brings reception of wealth and military action within a single organised surface. Figures and boats communicate movement between a coastal or island setting and the royal receiving space. The arrangement supports interpretation of the band as a narrative of royal accomplishment, but does not require every transported item to be identified as cedar. The catalogue identification of tribute is firmer than a claim that the whole band records a specialised timber shipment.

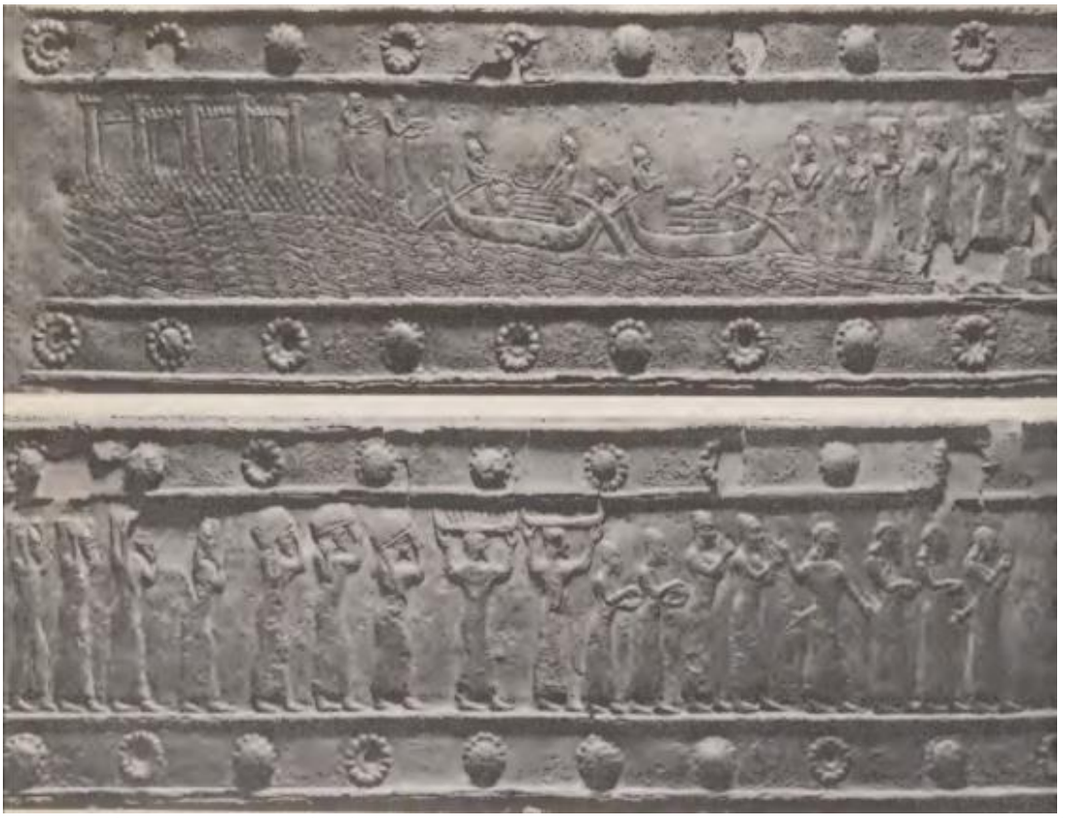


Figure 3. *Maritime tribute scene associated with the Balawat material. Rm.1041 is the catalogue comparison discussed in the text; the identity of the missing image must be confirmed.*

Figure 3 is intended to illustrate maritime tribute. Before publication, its image must be matched to an identified band, such as Rm.1041, rather than assumed to correspond to that object solely because its supplied caption mentions ships. The broader exhibition catalogue *Assyria to Iberia* situates Balawat material within the artistic and commercial connections of the first millennium BCE [2]. Such a context allows the representation of coastal resources to be discussed without reducing Phoenician maritime activity to an exclusively Assyrian-controlled operation.

Figure 4 was supplied as an uncaptained file reference. It cannot support a historical or iconographic claim until its subject, location, date, and source are identified. Retaining this slot records the outstanding illustration requirement without manufacturing a description of an image that was not available. The argument in this subsection rests on the published Balawat material and catalogue identifications rather than on that unverified illustration.

4.2. KHORSABAD: TIMBER TRANSPORT IN A ROYAL PALACE SETTING

The timber-transport reliefs from Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad provide a more direct basis for the paper's principal visual argument. The Louvre catalogue identifies AO 19889, AO 19890, and AO 19891 as parts of the naval or timber-transport sequence [13–15]. These are gypsum-alabaster reliefs rather than a single marble panel. Their inventory numbers, architectural provenance, and separate preserved scenes should remain distinct.

AO 19889 presents vessels transporting people and cedar wood within an inhabited maritime landscape. Its catalogue description also identifies distant coastal cities and real or fantastic marine beings [13]. AO 19890 includes navigation and the unloading of timber near the shore, with horse-headed prows and a range of marine creatures [14]. AO 19891 continues the material process through groups of helmeted men unloading cut cedar trunks in a mountainous setting [15]. Read together, these descriptions support analysis of a sequence connecting waterborne movement, arrival, and the handling of

valuable construction materials.

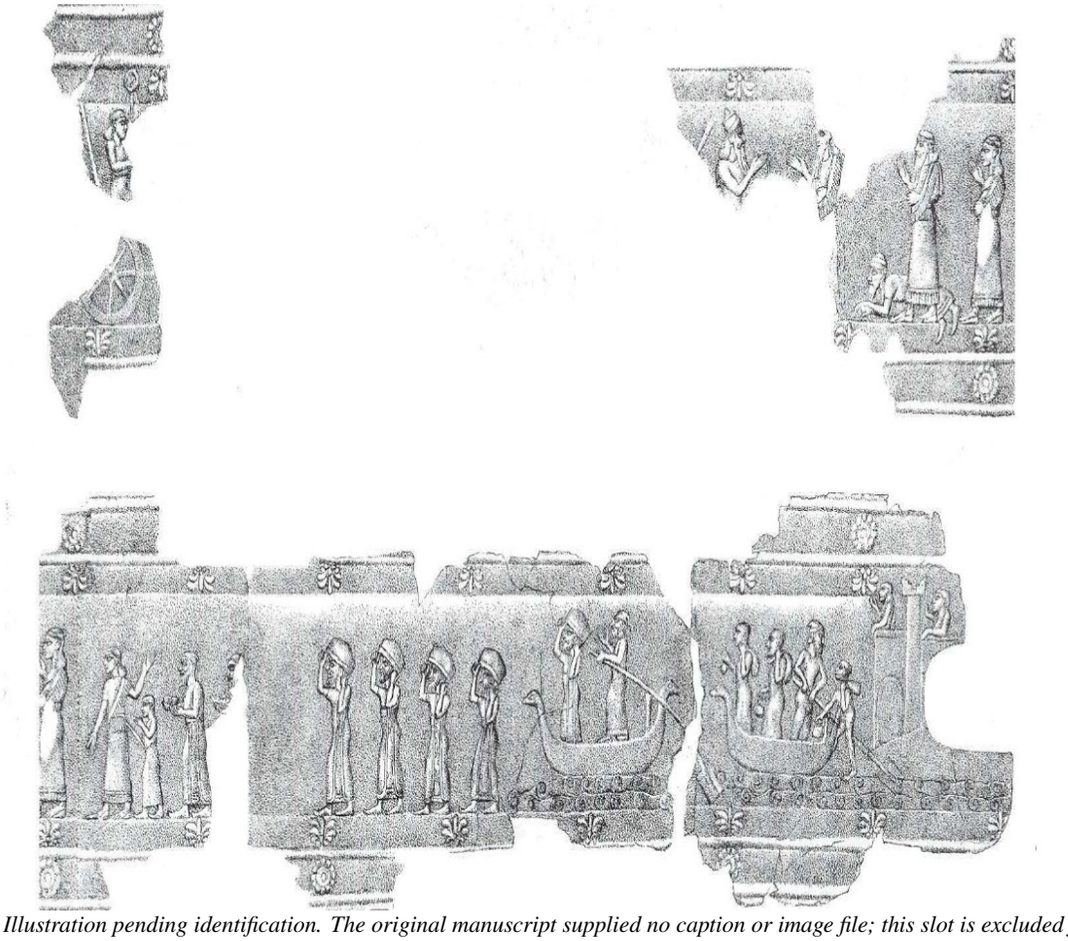


Figure 4. *Illustration pending identification. The original manuscript supplied no caption or image file; this slot is excluded from the evidential analysis.*

The visual interest of the sequence lies in the organisation of a process. Timber is not presented only as an isolated trophy; its movement involves vessels, handlers, shorelines, and differentiated spaces. This arrangement makes procurement intelligible as coordinated activity. The palace setting gives that activity a royal frame, while the repeated representation of cargo connects distant resources with the completion and furnishing of an Assyrian monumental environment. The proposed interpretation concerns how the scenes organise work and movement; it does not claim that every image reproduces the precise operation of a documented shipment.

The horse-headed prows are relevant to discussions of the vessels often described as *hippoi*. Nevertheless, the presence of that form does not establish the ownership of every vessel or the administrative status of each coastal community. Similarly, fantastic marine beings enrich the represented environment but cannot automatically be named Oannes or assigned a single protective function. The catalogue's descriptive term "fish-man" provides a more cautious starting point. An interpretation of the sea as a space of royal accomplishment remains possible, while a claim of complete Assyrian sovereignty over all maritime activity would exceed what the carved sequence alone demonstrates.

Figure 5 is reserved for an illustration of this timber-transport sequence. Because the original image file was not attached, its correspondence with an individual Louvre slab cannot yet be verified. The final image should be identified as AO 19889, AO 19890, AO 19891, or a clearly credited composite, with the caption specifying which scene is reproduced. Correcting the catalogue attribution is necessary before the illustration can function as evidence for the formal analysis.

4.3. LATER ROYAL CLAIMS AND THE LIMITS OF COMPARISON

Sennacherib's inscriptions supply a related textual context for the links between western campaigning, royal construction, and the display of resources. RINAP 3/1 contains the principal edition for many historical accounts, including the king's western relations, while RINAP 3/2 provides further building and other inscriptions [9, 16]. The account of Luli's flight and the installation of another ruler at Sidon belongs to that textual history. It should not be treated as a secure identification of a relief merely because a scene depicts boats, an island city, or departing people. Matching a named individual to an image requires a securely identified object and supporting contextual evidence.



Figure 5. *Timber transport from Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad, represented in the Louvre series AO 19889–AO 19891. The specific slab reproduced in the missing image requires confirmation.*

This distinction also changes how building descriptions are used. A text celebrating cedar roofing may explain why timber procurement mattered to royal self-presentation, but it does not prove that an unidentified scene shows cedar beams rather than another material or another kind of transport. The surviving images and the inscriptional accounts may share themes while differing in date, purpose, and setting. The study therefore avoids transferring Sennacherib's historical narratives onto Khorsabad images from Sargon II's palace or treating a general similarity of maritime motifs as evidence of one specific event.

Esarhaddon's inscriptions, edited in RINAP 4, record forceful interventions in the coastal region and demands on subordinate rulers [17]. The destruction and reorganisation of Sidon form part of a political narrative in which punishment, building, and provision are closely connected. These texts can contextualise the movement of valuable materials and the mobilisation of labour. They do not establish that all images of siege, deportation, or transport belong to Esarhaddon, nor that an unidentified group of workers is dragging cedar rather than stone or another load. The available evidence does not support a general claim that peaceful submission scenes disappeared in this reign or that one reign-wide visual formula replaced another.

Across these examples, the relationship between coercion and provision is more complex than a linear progression from occasional tribute to uninterrupted control of the coast. Campaigns, tributary obligations, local intermediaries, annexation, and continued negotiation could coexist. Royal accounts organise those relationships around the achievement of the monarch, while images select events and processes appropriate to their monumental setting. A consistent interpretation must distinguish the rhetorical presentation of successful acquisition from a demonstrated administrative system operating identically in every region and reign.

The Nahr al-Kalb illustration requires a further chronological distinction. The site contains commemorative monuments associated with multiple periods and political powers, as documented in UNESCO's Memory of the World entry [18]. A monument attributed to Nebuchadnezzar II belongs to the Neo-Babylonian period and cannot be placed among the visual achievements of Sargon II or another Assyrian king. Figure 6 is consequently retained only as a proposed comparison concerning the marking of a strategically important landscape. Without the missing image and an object-specific identification, it does not provide evidence for the representation of cedar in Neo-Assyrian reliefs.

The strongest conclusion from the combined evidence concerns the visual and textual association of timber acquisition

with royal provision. Balawat shows how tribute and movement could be organised within a gate programme, while Khorsabad provides an explicit timber-transport sequence in a palace environment. The distinction matters because the physical use of cedar, the depiction of coastal tribute, and the representation of transported cedar are related but separate phenomena. Their comparison reveals the range of ways in which resources could be incorporated into royal display without requiring a single meaning for every tree, boat, or cargo item.

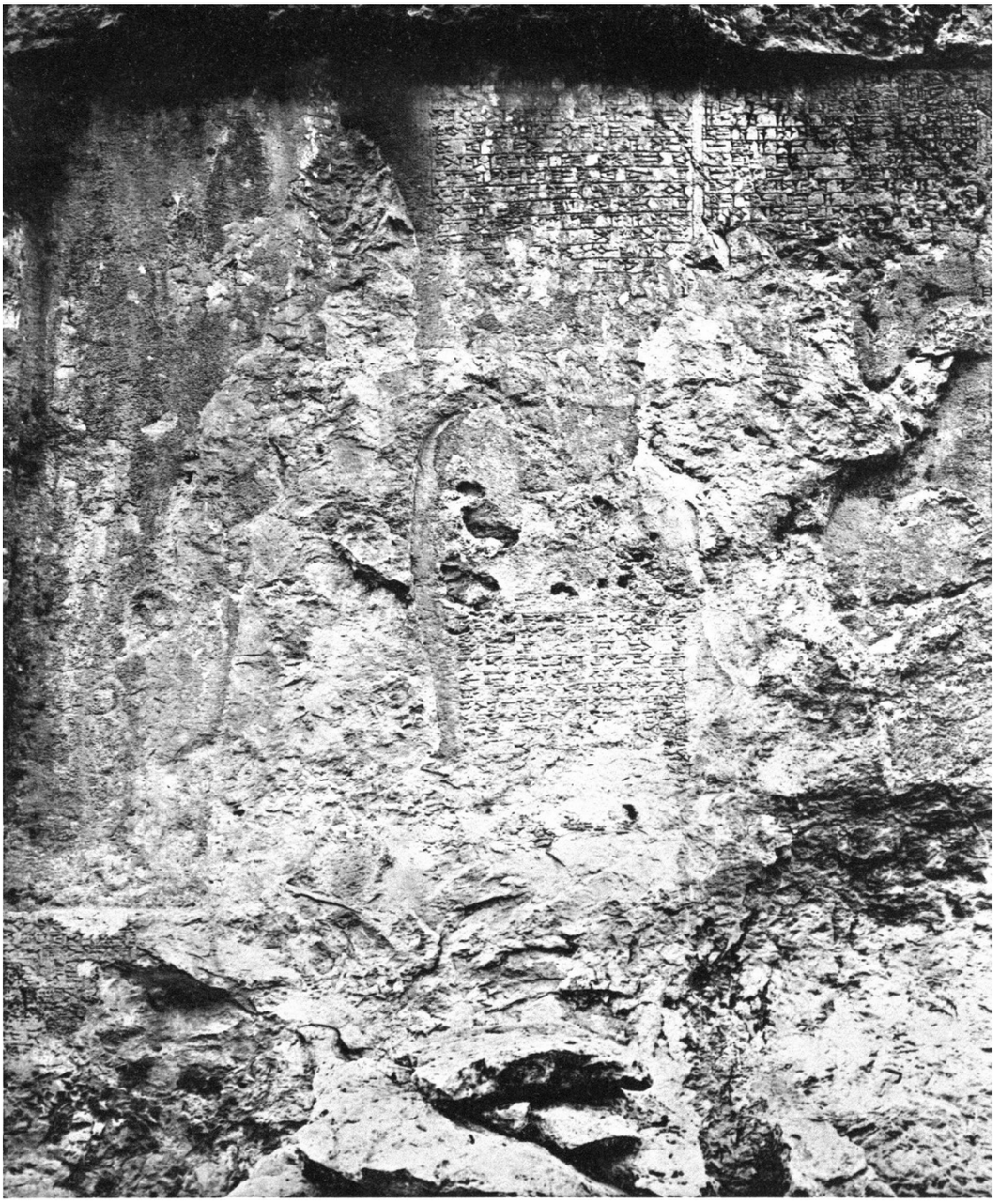


Figure 6. *Nahr al-Kalb monument attributed in the supplied caption to Nebuchadnezzar II. This is a proposed Neo-Babylonian comparison, not a Neo-Assyrian relief; identification of the missing image requires confirmation.*

Several limitations remain. Royal inscriptions present selected claims, museum catalogues summarise objects whose interpretation may change, and the present illustration files were unavailable for verification. The study offers neither a comprehensive inventory of cedar imagery nor an archaeological measurement of timber supply. Its argument is strongest where textual editions and identified objects permit a clearly defined comparison. Further work should provide plate-level references, secure matches between images and inventory numbers, original architectural positions where known, and explicit distinctions between ancient remains and modern reconstruction. These steps would permit more detailed formal analysis and reduce the risk of transferring descriptions between unrelated objects.

5. CONCLUSION

Cedar and timber acquisition formed part of the material and ideological vocabulary of Assyrian kingship. Their significance cannot be reduced either to a decorative plant motif or to a direct illustration of military conquest. Earlier literary and royal texts provide a background of distant landscapes, valued materials, and building achievement, while the Neo-Assyrian objects examined here organise tribute and transport within specific monumental settings. The relationship between those sources is interpretive and must be established through chronology, provenance, and the details of each object.

The Balawat bronze bands demonstrate the importance of distinguishing the cedar components of a gate from the diverse subjects represented on its metal decoration. The Khorsabad series, correctly identified as Louvre AO 19889–AO 19891, provides a clearer visual sequence of cedar transport and handling. Together, these examples support reading resource acquisition as part of royal self-presentation, while not proving that every depicted tree was cedar, every cargo originated in Lebanon, or every coastal polity experienced the same form of Assyrian administration.

The revised chronology separates Shamshi-Adad I and Tiglath-pileser I from the Neo-Assyrian case studies and assigns Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon II, Sennacherib, and Esarhaddon to their appropriate inscription editions. Later textual claims and the proposed Neo-Babylonian comparison are retained within defined limits. The resulting argument concerns the interaction of material value, architectural use, movement, labour, and royal narrative rather than a uniform progression towards absolute territorial and maritime control. Verification of the six missing images and their credits remains necessary before the illustrations can support a final publication.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed equally to the research, reviewed the manuscript, and approved the final version for publication.

Conflict Of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this research.

Funding Information

This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement

The study draws on published inscription editions, museum catalogue records, and scholarly sources identified in the references. No new archaeological or participant dataset was generated. The six image files referenced in the manuscript were not supplied and remain necessary for illustration verification and completion of image credits.

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