ASSYRIA'S EASTERN POLICY: THE KINGDOM OF ELLIPI

ASSUR'UN DOĞU POLİTİKASI: ELLİPİ KRALLIĞI

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Abstract

This study examines the political position, historical development, and cultural context of the Kingdom of Ellipi within the Neo-Assyrian eastern policy toward the Zagros Mountains. The primary aim of study is to evaluate Assyrian royal inscriptions alongside archaeological and geographical evidence to better understand the role of the Kingdom of Ellipi within the Zagros region and to discuss its possible connections with Luristan. This study comparatively analyses Assyrian inscriptions from the reigns of Shalmaneser III, Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon II, Sennacherib, and Esarhaddon, considering archaeological finds, settlement distributions, mountain pass systems, and Iron Age pottery traditions in Western Iran. Evidence indicates that Ellipi functioned as an active local political entity within power balance between Assyria and Elam during the 9th-7th centuries BC. Identifying a material culture group that can be directly and conclusively associated with Ellipi remains difficult. Nevertheless, the distribution and regional characteristics of the Baba Djan III "Genre Luristan" pottery tradition provide indirect evidence of the kingdom's cultural geography. These data suggest that the local political formations that developed within the fragmented topography of the Zagros played a more significant role in the eastern policy of Assyria than has generally been assumed.

Keywords: Kingdom of Ellipi, Neo-Assyria, Zagros, Luristan, Western Iran

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Özet

Bu çalışma, Yeni Assur Devleti'nin Zagroslar'a yönelik doğu politikası çerçevesinde Ellipi Krallığı'nın siyasi konumunu, tarihsel gelişimini ve Batı İran'daki kültürel bağlamını incelemektedir. Araştırmanın temel amacı, Assur kraliyet yazıtları ile arkeolojik ve coğrafi verileri birlikte değerlendirmek, Ellipi Krallığı'nın Zagros coğrafyasındaki rolünü anlamak ve Luristan bölgesiyle olan ilişkilerini tartışmaktır. Çalışmada III. Salmanasar, III. Tiglat-pileser, II. Sargon, Sanherib ve Asarhaddon dönemlerine ait Assur yazıtları karşılaştırmalı biçimde incelenmiş; ayrıca Batı İran'daki arkeolojik bulgular, yerleşim dağılımları, geçit sistemleri ve Demir Çağı çanak çömlek gelenekleri değerlendirilmiştir. Elde edilen veriler, Ellipi'nin MÖ 9-7. yüzyıllar arasında Assur ve Elam arasında güç dengeleri içinde etkin bir yerel siyasal aktör olduğunu gösterir. Bununla birlikte Ellipi'ye ait doğrudan tanımlanabilir bir maddi kültür grubunun henüz kesin biçimde belirlenemediği anlaşılır. Buna karşın Baba Can III tipi "Luristan türü" çanak çömleklerin dağılımı ve bölgesel özellikleri, Ellipi'nin kültürel coğrafyasına ilişkin dolaylı veriler sunmaktadır. Bu veriler, Zagroslar'ın parçalı topoğrafyası içinde gelişen yerel siyasi oluşumların, Assur'un doğu politikası açısından sanılandan daha etkin bir rol oynadığını gösterir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ellipi Krallığı, Yeni Assur, Zagroslar, Luristan, Batı İran

The Zagros Mountain belt, stretching between the Mesopotamian plains and the Iranian plateau, was more than a buffer zone shaped by the military campaigns of major empires; it also constituted a political and cultural contact zone formed through interactions among local kingdoms, tribal communities, and communication networks. The interest of major powers in the region, such as Assyria, Elam, Babylonia, and Urartu, were directly connected to the control of natural resources, mountain passes, trade routes, and strategic military corridors. For this reason, the region should be approached not only through the expansionist policies of large states and their interest in raw material resources but also through the local political formations that managed to survive within this sphere of pressure and competition.

Knowledge concerning the Zagros people during the Iron Age derives largely from Neo-Assyrian inscriptions. During this period, the Zagros became a principal target of Assyria's eastern policy. Assyria's military and administrative interventions to the east were shaped by factors such as the control of the routes linking Mesopotamia with the Iranian plateau, access to mineral resources in the mountainous regions, security of trade networks, and supply of horses (Grayson, 2008a, p. 266). In this process, the Assyrian kings not only conducted repeated campaigns into the region, but also incorporated certain political entities into vassal relationships, annexed some territories directly into the provincial system, and established new administrative centres at strategic locations (Frame, 2013, pp. 436-437). The frequent appearance of local political units such as Mannea, Zamua, Parsua, Karalla, Allabria, Media, and Ellipi in Assyrian inscriptions (Grayson, 2002, pp. 212-213; 2008a, p. 266; 2008b, pp. 79-80) demonstrates the fragmented political geography of western Iran and the Zagros zone.

Simultaneously, the history of the region cannot be reconstructed solely through Assyrian royal inscriptions and the military campaigns recorded in them. Beyond military expeditions and relations of political domination, the region must also be considered in light of geographical corridors, seasonal mobility, mineral resources, transhumant patterns, settlement systems, and the circulation of material culture. Such an approach also raises broader questions concerning the interpretation of Zagros material culture. Certain pottery groups associated with the Medes, the Manneans, and Ellipi point to a more complex historical context in which cultural formations in Western Iran emerged through interaction among different local communities. Therefore, this article therefore seeks to evaluate the eastern policy of Neo-Assyria toward the Zagros and its impact on the region through a combined examination of written sources and geographical evidence. This study aims to clarify the extent of Assyrian activity within the Zagros zone and the nature of its relations with the region by comparing campaign narratives, place names, and political relations recorded in Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions.

Geographical Context of the Zagros

A proper evaluation of the historical and archaeological development of the Zagros requires attention not only to material cultural remains but also to the environmental and social contexts in which these remains emerged. The Zagros form a fragmented topographical belt that extends between Mesopotamia's low plains and the Iranian plateau's elevated regions. This belt stretches from the Lake Urmia basin in the northwest to the region of Fars in the southeast and is characterised by varying elevation zones, narrow valleys, high plateaus, and mountain passes. Formed by parallel mountain chains running predominantly in a north-south direction, this landscape created a geography in which movement was channelled through specific routes (Fig. 1).

The western Zagros slopes descend more steeply and unevenly toward Mesopotamia. In this area, valleys carved by rivers such as the Diyala, the Lesser Zab, and the Greater Zab created natural corridors through the mountains. Throughout history, these valleys shaped the principal routes of east-west movement; military campaigns, commercial circulation, and population movements all passed through these corridors. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the Assyrian kings campaign routes largely followed these lines of passage (Levine, 1974).

In the interior regions of the Zagros, the topography becomes considerably more complex. Enclosed basins and plateau surfaces situated between high mountain ranges formed micro-regions in which local settlement networks developed. Further east, the Zagros gradually merge into the Iranian plateau's broader and more open landscape. These transitional zones, particularly in regions where political entities such as Mannea, Media, and Ellipi emerged (Levine, 1974; Medvedskaya, 1999), present an environment in which mountainous and semi-arid landscapes intersect. Within the context of Assyria's eastern policy, this geography functioned both as a landscape that shaped campaign routes and as an environmental setting that influenced the forms of resistance adopted by local powers.

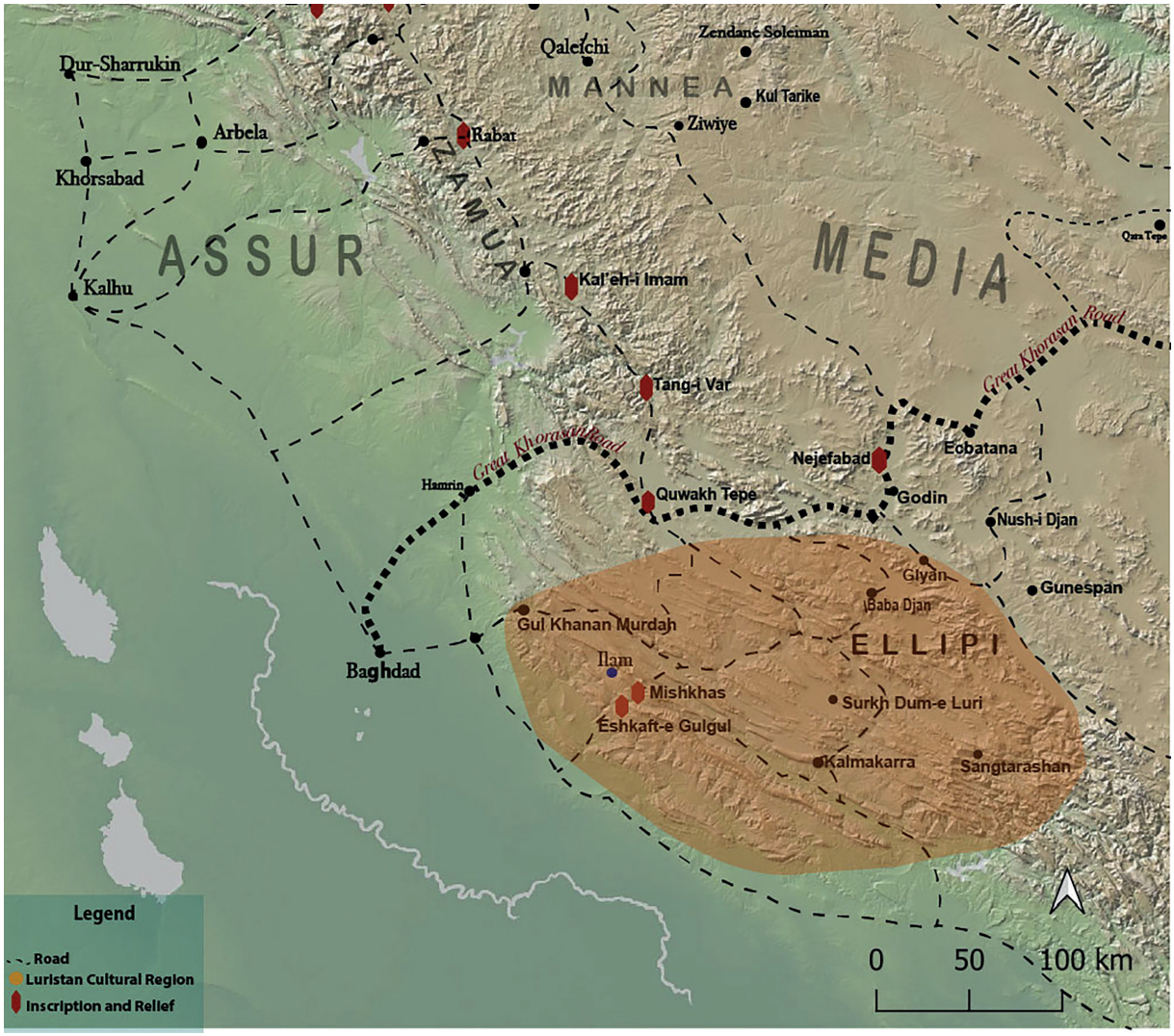


Figure 1
Map showing the natural routes through which the Assyrians advanced into the Zagros, the Assyrian inscriptions and rock reliefs positioned along these routes, and the possible location of Ellipi / *Assurluların Zagroslar'a yönelik seferlerinde izledikleri doğal güzergâhları, bu güzergâhlar üzerinde bulunan Assur yazıtları/kabartmalarını ve Ellipi'nin olası konumunu gösteren harita* (Ş. Kaya, 2026)

The fragmented nature of the Zagros landscape and its topography shaped by natural mountain passes make it difficult to define the boundaries of the region's political formations. In this context, differing views have emerged regarding the localisation of the Kingdom of Ellipi. Scholars have proposed various locations based on Assyrian inscriptions, geographical data, and archaeological evidence.

The first comprehensive evaluations of the Kingdom of Ellipi were presented in the works of E. Schrader. Although his study relied on a limited body of source material, Schrader nevertheless developed a coherent and well-argued proposal for the kingdom's location according to the standards of his

time[1] (Schrader, 1878, p. 174). Another important contribution came from M. Streck, who broadly placed the Kingdom of Ellipi in northwestern Luristan and defined this location with considerable accuracy in relation to modern geography (Streck, 1898, p. 376). His proposal was largely adopted and cited by subsequent researchers. L. D. Levine argued that the Kingdom of Ellipi was situated in the Western Zagros, between Elam and Assyria, within the borders of Luristan and south of the Great Khorasan Road (Levine, 1974, p. 106). According to Levine, its northern boundary corresponded to Ḫarḫar, while its western boundary roughly matched the present-day Iran-Iraq frontier; the eastern boundary, however, could not be determined with certainty. Drawing upon Assyrian texts and later scholarship, I. Medvedskaya proposed that the territory of Ellipi corresponded to the Pish-i Kuh region of Luristan (Medvedskaya, 1999, pp. 58-59). In her reconstruction, the kingdom was bounded in the north by the Garin Mountains immediately north of Aleshtar, extended eastward to Mount Oshtoran, and reached the difficult terrain of Kabir-Kuh in the west (Medvedskaya, 1999, pp. 58-59). While the eastern boundary was defined by the Garin mountain range, the region itself was divided into eastern and western sectors by the Kuh-i Sefid range (Goff Meade, 1968, pp. 105-108). Within this geographical framework, the pottery assemblage from Level III at Baba Djan Tepe, dated to the 9th-8th centuries BC and identified as "Genre Luristan" (Goff Meade, 1968, pp. 115-116), has been interpreted as reflecting a regional cultural production tradition and has therefore been discussed in relation to Ellipi by several scholars (Bahrami, 2022; Medvedskaya, 1999).

Assyrian Presence in the Zagros

During the 1st millennium BC, Western Iran witnessed continuous struggles and shifting political tensions among the Urartians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Manneans, Medes, Ellipians, and Elamites. Among these conflicts, the struggles between the Assyrians and their eastern neighbours in the Zagros Mountains stand out most clearly due to their extensive representation in written sources. From the 10th to the 7th centuries BC, Assyrian armies repeatedly campaigned in the Zagros to control the region's rich natural and mineral resources, secure the Great Khorasan Road connecting Mesopotamia with the Iranian plateau, and ensure access to the horses bred by the peoples of Western Iran (Fuchs, 2017, p. 260).

Assyrian interest in the east began during the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BC) in the early 9th century BC. The region of Zamua, located in the western Zagros, was first reduced to Assyrian vassalage and subsequently incorporated into the imperial provincial system (Grayson, 2002, p. 40). Although this policy of imposing vassal status followed by direct annexation was implemented consistently in the western territories of Assyria, it was not maintained with the same stability in the east. Campaigns toward the Zagros continued under Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC), the son of Ashurnasirpal II, yet Assyrian authority in the region never developed into uninterrupted or permanent control due to the political and geographical conditions of the Zagros and the resistance of local powers (Levine, 1972, p. 6).

Neo-Assyrian inscriptions provide evidence for the existence of numerous small kingdoms and local political formations such as Mannea, Ellipi, Zamua, Hubuškia, Ḫarḫar, Kišesim, Media, Gizilbunda, Gilzanu, Andia, Karalla, Allabria, Parsua, Namri, Hamban, Araziaš, Sangibuti, Abdadani, and Bit-Kapsi (Frame, 2013, 2021; Grayson, 2002). In the context of Assyria's eastern policy, most of these small kingdoms appear as vassal territories obliged to provide tribute.

For a long time, the Assyrian presence in the Zagros was known primarily through written sources, while archaeological evidence remained limited. However, discoveries made from the second half of the twentieth century onwards have provided tangible evidence of Assyrian activity in Western Iran (Potts et al., 2019). Among the earliest and most significant archaeological finds are the Assyrian objects recovered during the

[1] Schrader places the kingdom of Ellipi geographically within the region of southern Media and defines this area as extending from the upper basin of the Kerchâ (Karkheh) River and the zone where its tributaries originate, across the Behistun Plain and as far as the frontier of Hamadan (Ecbatana). This reconstruction is based primarily on a comparative evaluation of the campaign routes and place names recorded in Assyrian inscriptions dating to the reigns of Shalmaneser III, Sargon II, and Sennacherib (Schrader, 1878, pp. 172-178).

excavations at Hasanlu (Cifarelli, 2019), the stele of Sargon II discovered at Najafabad in 1965 (Frame, 2013; Levine, 1972), and the stele of Tiglath-pileser III reportedly found in Western Iran in 1968 (Levine, 1972; Tadmor & Yamada, 2011, pp. 80-87, No. 35). Other important discoveries include the rock relief of Sargon II uncovered at Tang-i Var in 1968 (Frame, 2006, pp. 56-58; 2013; 2021, pp. 438-443; Sarfaraz, 1969), the second rock relief at Eshkaft-e Gulgul dated to the reign of Esarhaddon or Ashurbanipal and discovered in 1972 (van der Spek, 1975; vanden Berghe, 1973) and the silver bucket bearing a cuneiform inscription of Esarhaddon found in Kalmakareh Cave in 1992 (Henkelman, 2003; Leichty, 2011, pp. 281-282).[2] Further evidence has expanded the scope of the Assyrian presence in the region. These include a rock relief discovered in 2009 at Heydarabad-e Mishkhas near Eshkaft-e Gulgul, which clearly reflects Assyrian iconographic traditions despite lacking an inscription (Alibaigi et al., 2012); a fragment of a rock relief brought to the Sanandaj Museum in 2012 (Radner et al., 2020: 91-92); and inscription fragments uncovered during excavations at Qal'eh-i Imam, southeast of Lake Zeribar, in 2015 (Radner et al., 2020). Most recently, a glazed brick inscribed in Assyrian cuneiform discovered at Rabat Tepe (Hassanzadeh & Curtis, 2018, p. 173, Fig. 192) and fragments of a Sargon II stele excavated at Quwakh Tepe in the Mahidasht Plain in 2021 (Alibaigi et al., 2023) have added to this growing body of evidence. These finds are of considerable importance for the archaeological confirmation of Assyrian administrative and military activities in the Zagros region.

Ellipi Kingdom: Sources, Political Identity, and Historical Representation

Information concerning the Kingdom of Ellipi can be traced only through Neo-Assyrian sources, as the kingdom itself possessed no known writing system (Grayson, 2002, p. 40). In written records, Ellipi appears as an independent political entity in Western Iran from the 9th to the 7th centuries BC (Grayson, 2002; 2008b, pp. 79-80). Neo-Assyrian texts mention Ellipi during the reign of Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC) (Grayson, 2002, p. 40). These references continue throughout the reign of Esarhaddon (Leichty, 2011, p. 181).

The Kingdom of Ellipi played a key role in Assyria's military and political activities in the east, particularly because of its close relations with Elam, and frequently pursued a pro-Elamite policy (Levine, 1974, p. 104; 1987, p. 230; Medvedskaya, 1999). At the same time, Assyrian sources explicitly refer to the rulers of Ellipi with the royal title "king," in much the same way as the rulers of Mannea (Balatti, 2017, pp. 264-266; Fuchs, 2023, p. 730).

In the 9th century BC, the tribute offered to Assyria by a local ruler named Barû of Ellipi during Shalmaneser III's campaign against Namri constitutes one of the earliest records documenting Ellipi's political existence (Grayson, 2008a, p. 266). Later, in the inscriptions concerning the eastern campaigns of Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 BC),[3] the joint mention of Iranzu, king of Mannea, and Dalta, king of Ellipi (Levine, 1972, p. 6), indicates that the relations of these two kingdoms with Assyria followed a parallel course. Tiglath-pileser III is known to have conducted only two eastern campaigns. The first, in 744 BC, was limited to the conquest of the small Zagros principalities in the Diyala basin, whereas the second, in 737 BC, advanced further into the mountainous interior as far as Media (Grayson, 2008b, p. 79). This second campaign is also mentioned on the heavily damaged stele of Tiglath-pileser III (Levine, 1972, p. 6; Tadmor & Yamada, 2011, p. 82) (Fig. 2).

> "As for Iranzu of Mannea, Talta (Dalta) of Ellipi, the chieftains of Namri, of Singibutu, of all of the mountains of the high country (?), [I received tribute from them] horses, mules, Bactrian camels, cattle, sheep, I imposed upon them (as tribute). I received it yearly in Assur. I made stelae in all (?) the lands. The great gods, my lords, I engraved thereon. I depicted a likeness of my majesty on it" (Levine, 1972, pp. 17-21).

[2] However, these and other cuneiform objects may be forgeries, or their inscriptions may have been added to the existing objects at a later date (Henkelman, 2003; Khosravi et al., 2010; Muscarella, 2014, 2018; Tavernier, 2011).

[3] There are also references to both Mannea and Ellipi during the reign of Adad-nirari III (810-783 BC) (Grayson, 2002, p. 212).

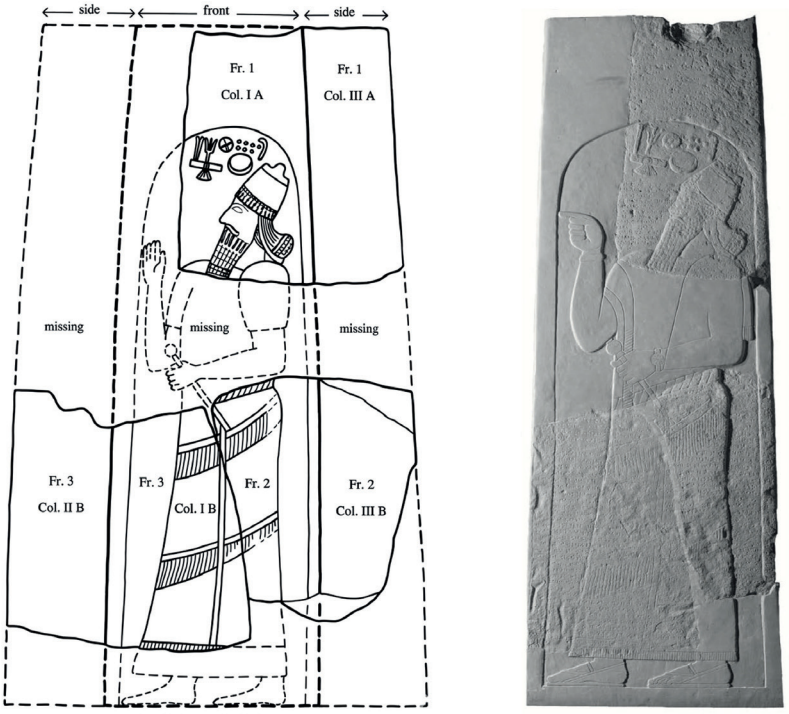


Figure 2
The Tiglath-pileser III stele, preserved in three fragments and currently preserved in the Israel Museum. The reconstruction drawing of the fragments is shown on the left, and the preserved condition of the stele on the right / *İsrail Müzesi'nde bulunan ve üç parçadan oluşan III. Tiglat-pileser steli. Solda parçaların rekonstrüksiyon çizimi, sağda ise stelin mevcut korunmuş hâli yer almaktadır* (Alibaigi & MacGinnis, 2018, Fig. 8; Tadmor & Yamada, 2011, Fig. 5).

The references to the Kingdom of Ellipi in this inscription state that Dalta, king of Ellipi, together with Mannea and the local rulers of mountainous regions such as Namri and Singibutu, presented tribute to the Assyrian king (Levine, 1972, pp. 17-21). The nature of the tribute is particularly significant. The prominence of livestock, including horses, mules, two-humped camels, cattle, and sheep, indicates that animal husbandry largely influenced the economy of the Zagros region. The frequent references in Assyrian sources to the horses of the Zagros (Grayson, 2008a, p. 266) further suggest that the region constituted a strategic military resource zone for the empire. Indeed, a considerable portion of the horses required for the cavalry forces and chariot units of the Assyrian army was supplied from these mountainous regions.

The expression "all of the mountains of the high country" used in the inscription reflects the tendency of Assyrian texts to portray the mountainous frontier regions as a broad geographical zone that had been conquered and subjected to tribute. Such statements, however, often indicate symbolic acknowledgment of Assyrian supremacy rather than direct political control. Therefore, the tribute relationship mentioned in the text does not imply that these kingdoms were incorporated directly into the Assyrian administrative system; instead, it points to a form of vassalage accepted under diplomatic and military pressure. The statement of Assyrian king that he erected stelae in these regions and inscribed the names of the gods upon them together with his own image also reflects an important element of Assyrian royal ideology. The practice of erecting stelae was more than the construction of victory monuments; it constituted a political act marking the king's authority symbolically within conquered territories or regions acknowledging Assyrian domination. Such monuments functioned both as displays of power directed toward local populations and as enduring expressions of Assyrian royal propaganda. In this respect, the stelae erected in the Zagros region by Tiglath-pileser III and the kings who followed him (Alibaigi et al., 2023; Levine, 1972) may be regarded as material indicators of Assyria's attempts to establish a lasting sphere of influence in this geography.

The inscription of Tiglath-pileser III also provides important evidence of the historical visibility of the Kingdom of Ellipi. The fact that Dalta is mentioned together with Iranzu, king of Mannea, indicates that Ellipi occupied the same diplomatic sphere as the other major kingdoms of the region during this period. In other words, Ellipi appears, like Mannea, as a political kingdom recognised in Assyrian sources and incorporated into a tributary relationship with Assyria (Levine, 1972, p. 7). During this period, Tiglath-pileser III established two new Assyrian provinces in the east, Bit-Hamban and Parsua, in order to strengthen the administrative organisation of the region (Grayson, 2008b, p. 79). This reorganisation may be regarded as one of the earliest concrete steps taken by Assyria toward the institutionalisation of its control over the Zagros region.

Following the reign of Tiglath-pileser III, information concerning the Kingdom of Ellipi appears in the inscriptions of Sargon II (721-705 BC). During his campaign of 716 BC, Sargon II first captured Kišesim, removed the ruler of the city, appointed an Assyrian governor in his place, renamed the city Kar-Nergal, and the surrounding territories within a new administrative unit (Levine, 1972). He then marched against Ḫarḫar, where he found that the local order loyal to Assyria had collapsed and that the population had turned towards Dalta, king of Ellipi. After suppressing the revolt, Ḫarḫar was reorganised and transformed into an Assyrian centre under the name Kar-Šarrukin. The city was reinforced through population transfers, and Assyrian control over the route leading into Median territory was strengthened (Grayson, 2008b, p. 94). The stelae erected in connection with the campaigns of Sargon II served as declarations of this new political order. In a manner comparable to the policies pursued by Tiglath-pileser III in Bit-Hamban and Parsua, Sargon made his authority visible in conquered and reorganised regions through inscriptions and royal imagery. Indeed, both in his annals and on the Najafabad stele (Fig. 3), he records the erection of three stelae at Kišesim (Kar-Nergal), Ḫarḫar (Kar-Šarrukin), and Izirtu (Frame, 2021, pp. 60-62).



Figure 3
The Sargon II stele discovered at Najafabad, currently preserved in the National Museum of Iran. The figure shows the reconstruction drawing, the front view of the stele, and the inscribed reverse side / *Najafabad'da bulunan ve günümüzde İran Millî Müzesi'nde muhafaza edilen II. Sargon steli. Figürde stelin rekonstrüksiyon çizimi, ön yüzü ve yazıtlı arka yüzü gösterilmektedir* (Börker-Klähn, 1982, p. 173; Levine, 1972, Pl. VII-VIII).

When the written and visual evidence from the reign of Sargon II is considered together, it becomes clear that the king's activities in Western Iran can also be traced through inscriptions and reliefs left at different locations across the region. In this context, stelae and rock inscriptions gain importance as material traces of the campaigns described in the royal annals. Written sources explicitly state that stelae were erected at

Kišesim (Kar-Nergal) and Ḫarḫar (Kar-Šarrukin) (Frame, 2021, p. 454). The Tiglath-pileser III stele, the Najafabad stele, the Quwakh Tepe stele, and the Tang-i Var rock relief (or Urāmānāt relief) that survive today demonstrate how this practice was materialised across different parts of the region (Alibaigi et al., 2023; Frame, 2021, pp. 27-28, 438, 444).



Figure 4
The Tang-i Var rock relief (Uramanat relief), carved on the flanks of Kuh-i Zinanah in the Tang-i Var pass, Iranian Kurdistan, approximately 50 km southwest of Sanandaj and 85 km northwest of Kermanshah / *İran Kürdistanı'nda, Sanandaj'ın yaklaşık 50 km güneybatısında ve Kirmanşah'ın 85 km kuzeybatısında bulunan Tang-i Var geçidindeki Zinanah Dağı'nın yamacına işlenmiş Tang-i Var (Uramanat) kaya kabartması* (Kojaro, 2025)



Figure 5
Relief and inscribed stele fragments discovered at Quwakh Tepe / *Kuvakh Tepe kazılarında açığa çıkan kabartma ve yazıtlı stel parçaları* (Alibaigi et al., 2023, Fig. 7, 8, 10, 13).

The Tang-i Var rock inscription (Fig. 4) reflects a different phase from the earlier Sargon II Najafabad and Quwakh Tepe stele in terms of both its historical references and discursive structure (Frame, 2021, p. 438). The explicit reference in the text to the defeat of Marduk-apla-iddina (II) and the re-establishment of Assyrian control over Babylon makes it possible to date the inscription to a period after 710-709 BC (Frame, 2021, p. 438). Whereas the texts of the Najafabad and Quwakh Tepe stele (Fig. 5) treat places such as Karalla, Kišesim, and Ḫarḫar as concrete military objectives and administrative centres, in the Tang-i Var inscription these regions instead appear within a list of territories already brought under the king's authority (Frame, 2021, p. 438).

The inscription fragment discovered at Qal'eh-i Imam and the brick fragment recovered from Rabat Tepe[4] should also be included within this group of inscriptions attributed to Sargon II. The Qal'eh-i Imam find[5] is associated with the reign of Sargon II on the basis of its formulaic expressions and, in particular, the close parallels in the titles attributed to Dalta and Iranzu (Frame, 2021, p. 437). The reference to Ḫarḫar in the text, together with information concerning its reorganisation as Kar-Šarrukin, is consistent with the data recorded in the royal annals.

Throughout his sixteen-year reign, Sargon II conducted several military campaigns in Western Iran. The year 714 BC witnessed the most extensive of Sargon II's campaigns and one of the most significant military achievements of his reign (Fuchs, 2017, p. 264). In that year, the Assyrian army marched into the province of Lullumu, where the king personally supervised the troops, and from there advanced toward the regions of Zikirtu and Andia. During the campaign, Sargon received tribute from Uishdish, Mannea, Allabria, and Ellipi, as well as from the local rulers of Parsua, Namri, and the Medean territories (Frame, 2021, p. 444; Grayson, 2008b, p. 95). The campaign was generally successful and considerably expanded Assyrian influence in Western Iran. However, in 713 BC, the Assyrian administration was forced to deal with renewed rebellions in the regions of Karalla and Ellipi. In Karalla, which had previously been forcibly annexed to the province of Lullumu in 716 BC, the local population revolted, expelled the Assyrian officials, and installed Amitaši, the brother of Aššur-le'u, as ruler. In 713 BC, the Assyrian army suppressed the revolt, recaptured Karalla, and reorganised it as an independent province (Frame, 2013, 2021; Grayson, 2008b). In Ellipi, King Dalta remained loyal to Assyria but was deposed following uprisings in parts of the kingdom. Sargon's army intervened in the rebellious districts and carried out severe punitive measures; after acts of plunder and repression, Dalta was restored to the throne (Grayson, 2008b, p. 97). Nevertheless, Ellipi soon began to resist Assyria once again. Much like the struggle for the throne between Aza and Ullusunu following the death of Iranzu, the Assyria-loyal king of Mannea, the death of Dalta, the Assyria-loyal ruler of Ellipi, in 708 BC triggered a new civil conflict within the kingdom. His two sons, Išpabara and Nibe, born of different mothers, each claimed the throne. Nibe formed an alliance with the Elamite king Šutruk-Nahhunte II, whereas Išpabara appealed to Assyria for support. Sargon II dispatched an army in 708 BC, defeated Nibe, and confirmed the rule of Išpabara despite the support provided by the Elamite army. With Assyrian military and diplomatic backing, Išpabara defeated Nibe and the Elamite forces supporting him and seized Ellipi's throne in 707 BC. Shortly afterwards, however, Išpabara became involved in a conspiracy against Assyria. Following these developments and after Sargon II's death in 705 BC, his successor Sennacherib launched a campaign against Ellipi in 702 BC. During this campaign, however, he was unable either to capture Išpabara or to remove him from the throne (Grayson & Novotny, 2012: 10). According to the inscriptions, Sennacherib targeted the Kassites and the Yasubigallians during the expedition, capturing and plundering the fortified city of Bīt-Kilamzah. Moreover, he captured and plundered the principal cities of Ellipi, including Šišitru and Kummahlum, and annexed part of the region (Grayson & Novotny, 2012).

[4] During excavations conducted between 2006 and 2008 at Rabat Tepe II, identified as the city of Mannea, five Neo-Assyrian cuneiform bricks were discovered. Three of these preserved legible cuneiform signs, whereas the remaining two were poorly preserved. All inscriptions are written in Neo-Assyrian cuneiform script. Irving Finkel reads the text as: [LUGAL(?) URU.ar-zi?[-z]u], "king(?) of the city of Arzizu"(Hassanzadeh & Curtis, 2018, p. 171; Heidari, 2010, p. 150).

[5] In 2015, a labourer presented a fragment from the front face of a stone stele to a team of Iranian archaeologists excavating at Qal'eh-i Imam near Lake Zeribor under the direction of Dr. Hassan Karimian. The poorly preserved inscription probably belongs to Sargon II and is most likely connected with his military activities in the Zagros Mountains: "…No translation possible…[... a] submissive [subje]ct who pul[led my yoke ... king of the land Ellip]i, the land Ḫarḫ[ar ...] land [...]" (Frame, 2021, p. 437).

Sargon's inscriptions indicate that Bīt-Barru was a province attached to the kingdom of Ellipi. This suggests that, during the reign of Sargon II, Ellipi may have expanded its borders and emerged as a significant regional power. Indeed, when referring to the same region, Sennacherib describes Ellipi as a "wide land" (Grayson & Novotny, 2014, p. 237). The growing strength of Ellipi may also explain why neighbouring smaller kingdoms, such as the Ḫarḫarites who feared an Assyrian invasion in 716 BC, sought to place themselves under Ellipian protection. In this context, Sargon's attempts to re-establish Assyrian authority over Ellipi, which maintained close ties with Elam, should likewise be understood within the framework of regional power politics (Medvedskaya, 1999, p. 54). After the death of Sargon II, Sennacherib (704-681 BC) regarded Elam, Babylon, and Ellipi as the principal threats along Assyria's southeastern frontier. In 702 BC, Sennacherib launched a campaign against Ellipi, devastated the country, and once again attached Bīt-Barru and its surrounding territories to the Assyrian province of Ḫarḫar (Grayson & Novotny, 2014, p. 93). Despite this, anti-Assyrian resistance in the region was not fully suppressed. Ellipi later joined the anti-Assyrian coalition led by Elam and Babylon at the Battle of Halule in 691 BC. This development indicates that Ellipi's policy toward Assyria had taken an increasingly hostile turn (Fuchs, 2017, p. 264).

The references to Ellipi in Sennacherib's palace inscriptions from Nineveh (Grayson & Novotny, 2014, pp. 73-74, 237-238) clearly show that the Assyrian policy in Western Iran assumed a harsher, more direct, and more destructive character after the reign of Sargon II. In these texts, Ellipi is represented as a hostile land requiring direct punishment. The statement, "I ruined the land of Ellipi and destroyed its settlements" (Grayson & Novotny, 2014, p. 74), reflects the conventional rhetoric of destruction characteristic of Assyrian royal ideology, but it also indicates that Ellipi was regarded as a serious source of political instability and a threat to Assyrian security.

A fragment of an octagonal clay prism from Aššur, describing Sennacherib's military campaigns and building activities, states that Išpabara abandoned his throne, palace, and cities and fled before the arrival of the Assyrian army (Grayson & Novotny, 2014, pp. 237-238). The inscription represents a typical example of the "flight of the enemy" motif frequently encountered in Assyrian royal texts. Although this narrative served as an ideological formula emphasising the king's absolute military superiority, it also suggests that the central authority of the Kingdom of Ellipi was seriously weakened in the face of Sennacherib's intervention. What is particularly noteworthy is that the Assyrian king does not boast of defeating the ruler of Ellipi directly, but instead focuses on centres such as Mar'ubištu and Akkuddu, described in the text as "royal residence cities." The siege, capture, burning, destruction, and plundering of cities such as Mar'ubištu, Akkuddu, Şi(ş)şirtu, and Kummahlum, together with numerous smaller settlements in their vicinity (Grayson & Novotny, 2014, pp. 237-238), reflects the standard punitive strategy employed by Assyria in mountainous frontier regions. This strategy included several key elements: the destruction of local centres of power, the deportation of populations, the seizure of livestock, the direct incorporation of strategic territories into the Assyrian administrative system, and the establishment of new administrative centres. The annexation of Bīt-Barrû demonstrates (Grayson & Novotny, 2014, pp. 237-238) that Assyria was no longer satisfied with its indirect influence over Ellipi but instead sought to incorporate the region into its own administrative structure.

The capture of the city of Elenzaš and its renaming as Kār-Sennacherib (Grayson & Novotny, 2014, pp. 79, 238) likewise represents a characteristic yet powerful example of Assyrian imperial practice. The renaming of a city effectively constituted a declaration of sovereignty that redefined the place itself. In this way, the existing local political memory was erased and replaced with a new Assyrian centre bearing the king's name. Moreover, the resettlement of populations deported from conquered territories into this new centre, together with the city's placement under the authority of the governor of Ḫarḫar, clearly reflects the Assyrian policy of resettlement and administrative integration in frontier regions.

The inclusion of Ellipi alongside Elam, Babylon, the Chaldeans, and the Arameans in the context of Halule further clarifies the kingdom's role in regional politics. This record shows that Ellipi was not regarded as an isolated power acting independently against Assyria but rather as part of a broader anti-Assyrian coalition (Grayson & Novotny, 2014, p. 194). Therefore, in Sennacherib's texts, Ellipi is represented on two different

levels: on the one hand, as a hostile land subjected to punishment and fragmentation on a local scale; on the other, as a political actor of sufficient regional importance to form alliances with Elam and Babylon. This dual representation clearly illustrates the significance of Ellipi within Assyrian frontier policy.

It should also be noted that Assyrian inscriptions, as always, employ a heavily propagandistic royal language. Expressions such as "I devastated," "I destroyed," "I burned with fire," and "I diminished his land" belong to the standard victory rhetoric of Assyrian royal inscriptions and should not be assumed to reflect historical reality in a direct or literal sense. Even so, such exaggerated formulae are sufficient to indicate that Ellipi was subjected to serious military intervention during Sennacherib's reign, that some of its cities were destroyed, that it lost territory, and that its political unity was weakened. The continued appearance of Ellipi within anti-Assyrian coalitions in later periods further suggests that, despite Sennacherib's rhetoric of destruction, the kingdom was not completely eliminated, although it was severely weakened.

References to the Kingdom of Ellipi continue into the reign of Esarhaddon (680-669 BC), who succeeded Sennacherib on the Assyrian throne. However, the name of Ellipi appears for the last time in connection with the Median revolt that occurred during Esarhaddon's reign (Leichty, 2011, 181). Documents from this period show that Ellipi openly sided with the rebel alliance in the uprising. The absence of any further references to Ellipi in later written sources suggests that the kingdom lost its independence and came under Median control, marking the end of the period of local kingdoms in Western Iran.

The Kingdom of Ellipi emerged as a local political power of strategic importance for Assyria's eastern policy between the ninth and seventh centuries BC. Under Tiglath-pileser III, Ellipi appeared as a kingdom that paid tribute to and acknowledged Assyrian supremacy, whereas it became directly subject to Assyrian administrative intervention and regional reorganisation policies during the reign of Sargon II. By the time of Sennacherib, it was defined as a hostile land that required punishment. This development reflects the flexible yet increasingly harsh character of Assyrian policy in the Zagros, which shifted between vassalage, political supervision, suppression of revolts, and direct annexation. Simultaneously, Ellipi's participation alongside Elam and Babylon in anti-Assyrian coalitions demonstrates that the kingdom was not merely a passive buffer zone but an active political force within regional power relations. Finally, the disappearance of Ellipi from the sources after the reign of Esarhaddon suggests that the kingdom may have passed under Median control, marking the end of the period of small local kingdoms in Western Iran.

Archaeological Identification of the Kingdom of Ellipi and its Geographical and Cultural Connections with Luristan

All evidence for the existence of Ellipi derives from written sources, and this creates an important archaeological problem: can the Kingdom of Ellipi be identified archaeologically, and how might an Ellipian cultural assemblage be distinguished? These questions are difficult to answer because no direct archaeological material that can be securely identified as Ellipian has yet been recognised. Nevertheless, evaluations based on Assyrian sources concerning the geographical location of Ellipi allow the archaeological evidence from the region to be interpreted indirectly (Levine, 1974; Medvedskaya, 1999). Within this geographical framework, the pottery assemblage discovered in Level III at Baba Djan Tepe, dated to the ninth-eighth centuries BC and defined as "Genre Luristan" (Fig. 6-7) (Goff Meade, 1968, pp. 115-116), reflects a regional cultural production tradition and has led to discussions concerning its possible association with Ellipi (Bahrami, 2022; Medvedskaya, 1999). The pottery from Baba Djan III displays connections and similarities with the Iron Age II cultures of Western Iran, particularly those of Luristan, Khurvin, Sialk, and Hasanlu, while exhibiting a distinctive local character in its formal and technical features (Goff, 1978). Most of the vessels are handmade and well fired, with light grey, beige, and reddish tones predominating. The surfaces are generally burnished or carefully smoothed; shallow parallel grooves, incised decoration, applied knobs, and triangular-dot motifs are characteristic features. The repertory of forms is dominated by small jars with perforated shoulders, jugs with a single vertical handle, open-mouthed pots, cups, and bowls. Spouted teapot, a diagnostic form for Iron I-II, is almost absent in Pish-i Kuh. This form is widespread at sites such as Khurvin and Sialk, suggesting that its appearance at Baba Djan represents only a limited or relatively late influence (Goff, 1978, pp. 34-36).

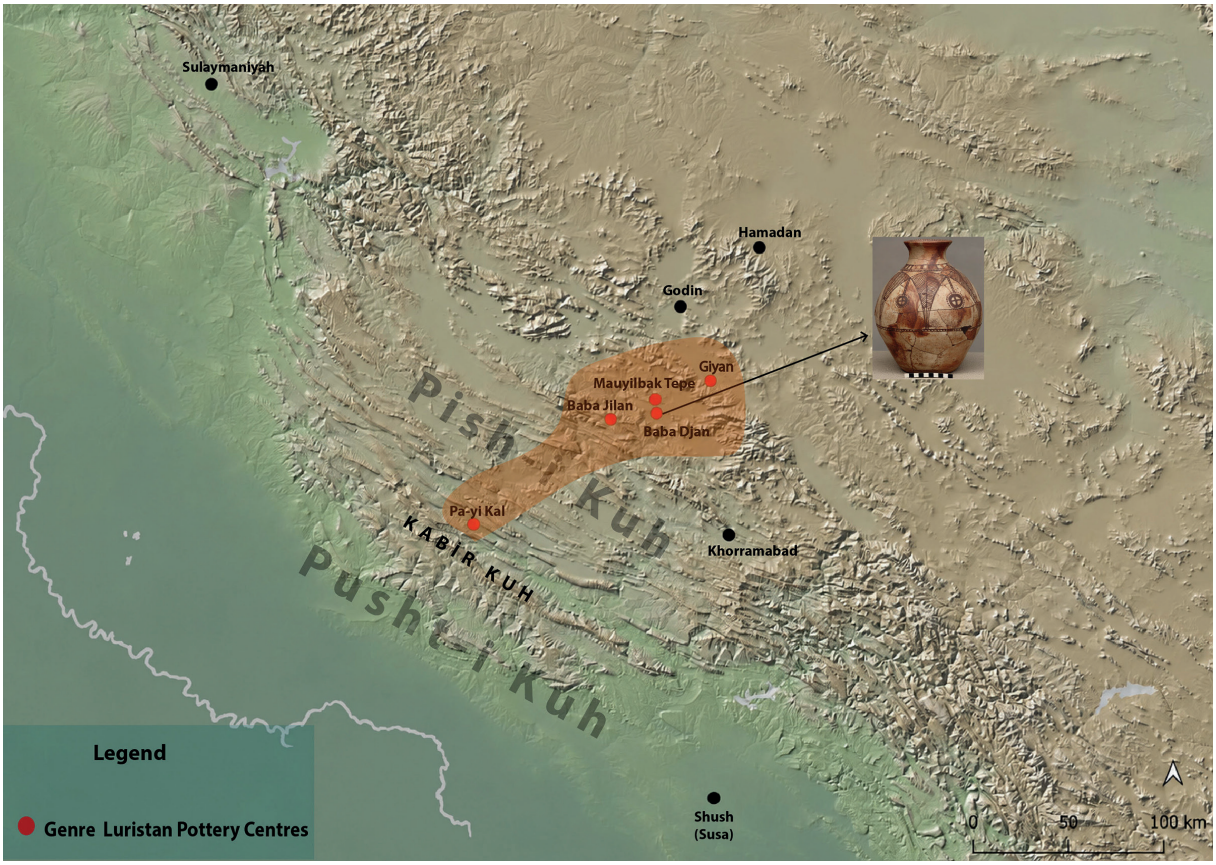


Figure 6
Map showing the sites where Luristan-type pottery has been identified / *Luristan tipi çanak çömleğinin görüldüğü arkeolojik yerleşimleri gösteren harita* (Ş. Kaya, 2026).

By comparison, the vessels of the Baba Djan III tradition differ markedly from the Median pottery assemblages at Nush-i Djan. Whereas the Median examples are thin-walled, wheel-made, and characterised by uniform surfaces, the Baba Djan III wares are thicker-walled, more rustic in texture, and decorated with geometric motifs. Although Goff tended to associate this group with the Medes (Goff, 1968, p. 131),[6] Medvedskaya rejected this interpretation and argued that the tradition followed a developmental trajectory independent of Median culture. In particular, she suggested that the concentration of painted vessels of the Baba Djan III type west of the Garin mountain range corresponds to the cultural geography of Ellipi (Medvedskaya, 1999, pp. 58-59). The fact that Median pottery appears west of the Garin range only from the seventh century BC onward is likewise consistent with this chronological and political process of expansion and influence (Medvedskaya, 1992, pp. 100-105; Medvedskaya, 1999, p. 59).

The Luristan tradition became widespread during the early first millennium BC, particularly in the late Iron Age II (950-800 BC) and Iron Age III (800-650 BC) periods and was frequently used in settlements and cemeteries of the Pish-i Kuh region (Adachi, 2004, p. 81). Roman Ghirshman first identified this type during excavations at Giyan Tepe (Contenau & Ghirshman, 1935, Pl. XVI), and was later designated by Clare Goff as the "Baba Djan III painted ware" at Baba Djan Tepe (Goff, 1978, p. 29). Vessels belonging to the Baba Djan III group are generally decorated with geometric motifs in kite or bow-tie forms. With a use-life spanning approximately three centuries, this group is divided into two principal phases: the "old style" (Baba Djan III), produced either by hand or on a slow wheel, and the fully wheel-made "new style" (Baba Djan IIIB). Newly identified examples south of Harsin indicate that technical diversity in Luristan pottery production increased through processes of cultural interaction (Goudarzi, 2023).

[6] P. R. S. Moorey suggested that this pottery tradition may have belonged to communities originating outside Luristan, possibly the Kassites, Cimmerians, Medes, or Elamites (Moorey, 1974, p. 19).

This chronological framework is supported by three independent radiocarbon (14C) measurements carried out at the Baba Jilan cemetery in Dilfan, all of which indicate a date range between 850 and 800 BC (Hasanpour et al., 2015, p. 176). A close correspondence has also been observed between the material culture from this cemetery and that of Baba Djan III in the same region (Goff, 1978, 47, Fig. 5-6). In addition, material recovered from ninth-eighth century BC levels at the excavations of Falak ol-Aflak Castle has been reported to display the same characteristics as the Baba Djan III group (Bahrami, 2022, p. 35).

This combined body of evidence suggests that the Baba Djan III tradition represents a distinctive local production practice in Luristan and provides indirect yet consistent indications concerning the cultural sphere of Ellipi through the features that differentiate it from the Median pottery tradition (Goff, 1978; Goff Meade, 1968). Recent studies, particularly those conducted by Iranian scholars, have drawn upon Medvedskaya's approach and evaluated the Luristan pottery tradition within the Kingdom of Ellipi's framework (Adachi, 2004; Bahrami, 2022; Goudarzi, 2023; Molazadeh & Goudarzi, 2016).

Another category of material culture that may be considered within the Kingdom of Ellipi is the group known as the Luristan bronzes. These bronzes represent a distinctive and geographically limited corpus of metal objects that differs markedly from the known typological and stylistic traditions of Iran and the ancient Near East (Moorey, 1971). The most characteristic examples of the Luristan bronzes are generally dated to Iron I, that is, between the twelfth and ninth centuries BC, whereas production became more intensive and widespread during the Iron II and Iron III periods, that is between the ninth and seventh centuries BC (vanden Berghe, 1968, p. 114; 1983, p. 119). Although the precise extent of Ellipi remains uncertain, the kingdom is generally thought to have been located in northwestern Luristan, particularly in the Pish-i Kuh region (Medvedskaya, 1999). The possible relationship between Ellipi and the Luristan bronzes becomes especially significant within this context. If the borders of Ellipi overlapped with the Luristan region, it is possible that the communities associated with bronze production lived within the political or cultural sphere of this kingdom. At present, however, there is no direct evidence linking the Luristan bronzes specifically to an Ellipian cultural identity. The geographical overlap nevertheless raises the possibility that these objects may at least have been used by communities identified with Ellipi. Simultaneously, the communities that used the Luristan bronzes are generally considered to have possessed a nomadic or semi-nomadic character (Kaya, 2026).

Nomadism and seminomadism have been proposed as the most prominent models of the lifeways of the communities associated with the Luristan bronzes (Kaya, 2026). The archaeological landscape of the Iron Age in the region is characterised less by large urban centres than by cemeteries, small-scale settlements, temporary occupation areas around mountain passes and sites connected with seasonal transhumant movement between summer and winter pastures. The cemetery zones concentrated in the Karkheh and Seymareh basins reflect forms of social organisation structured around mobility between highland and lowland zones (vanden Berghe, 1968, 1983). The topography of the Zagros, marked by narrow valleys and seasonal climatic conditions, also provided an environmental setting favourable to mobile lifeways. The nature of the bronze assemblages is likewise consistent with this mobility. The prevalence of weapons, portable standards, and personal bronze objects, together with the iconography of the bronzes themselves, suggests that this material culture may have been associated with mobile communities (Kaya, 2026). The fact that these objects have been recovered predominantly from cemeteries and cult places (vanden Berghe, 1968, 1983) further supports this interpretation. In addition, the control of mountain passes in the Luristan region, seasonal transhumant mobility, and economic activities such as pastoralism and transit trade contributed to the diversification of the social structure in the region (Kaya, 2026). Within this framework, the Luristan bronzes appear to be more closely connected with the material culture of nomadic or semi-nomadic groups maintaining a mobile, highland-lowland oriented way of life, rather than with settled palace-centred societies.



Figure 7
Genre Luristan pottery from Baba Djan (a-f), Mauyilbak Tepe (g-h), Tepe Giyan (i-j), and Baba Jilan (k) (digital colour enhancement based on published colour descriptions and reference codes) / *Baba Can (a–f), Mauyilbak Tepe (g–h), Tepe Giyan (i–j) ve Baba Jilan (k) kazılarında bulunmuş olan Luristan türü çanak çömlek örnekleri (renk kodları ve tanımları referans alınarak dijital ortamda yeniden renklendirilmiştir)* (Goff, 1978, Pl. IIa, IIIa, IVb; Goff Meade, 1968, Pl. IVb; Hasanpour et al., 2015, Pl. 16; Overlaet, 2003, Fig. 29-30, 37).

Conclusion

When the evidence relating to the Kingdom of Ellipi and the region of Luristan is considered within the broader framework of Assyria's eastern policy, the historical development of Western Iran during the first millennium BC can be understood through both military activity and the local political structures, mobility networks, and material culture traditions that emerged within the mountainous frontier zones. In this context, the Zagros belt was more than a frontier region shaped by the interventions of major powers such as Assyria, Elam, Babylon, and later the Medes; it also functioned as a zone of contact and competition defined by its mountain passes, resources, and local kingdoms. The distribution of Assyrian inscriptions and rock reliefs is closely connected with this political and geographical landscape. Monuments such as the Najafabad Stele, the Tang-i Var rock inscription and relief, the Quwakh Tepe stele fragments, and the Qal'eh-i Imam inscription are positioned along the natural passes and valley systems that provided access into the interior of the Zagros. Their placement reflects not only the routes followed by the Assyrian armies but also the projection of imperial authority across this frontier landscape. Concentrated particularly around the Great Khorasan Road and the natural corridors connected to it, these monuments indicate that during the reign of Sargon II, Western Iran had become a strategically important zone of intervention for Assyria. Within this framework, the Kingdom of Ellipi occupied a distinctive position among the local political formations of

Western Iran. Assyrian texts dating particularly to the reigns of Shalmaneser III, Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon II, and Sennacherib show that Ellipi was a kingdom with its own rulers, territorial boundaries, and political agenda. At the same time, the fact that all information concerning Ellipi derives from external sources, particularly Assyrian royal inscriptions, means that the historical reality of the kingdom is largely perceived through a framework defined from outside. Although the available evidence allows the political history of Ellipi to be traced to some extent, it makes the direct identification of its archaeological and cultural identity considerably more difficult.

To date, Ellipi has not yet been securely identified archaeologically as a clearly definable cultural region. No inscribed material, in situ finds, or unequivocal corpus of material culture reflecting an Ellipian identity has so far been identified. However, this absence does not mean that the material world of Ellipi is entirely inaccessible. On the contrary, when the geographical framework indicated by the Assyrian sources is considered together with the local pottery traditions, cemetery evidence, and regional distribution patterns identified in Luristan, particularly in the Pish-i Kuh region, indirect yet meaningful indications concerning the cultural geography of Ellipi can be obtained. The Baba Djan III pottery tradition is of particular importance within this context.

The Baba Djan III tradition represents a strong example of local production traditions in Western Iran in terms of both its technical and morphological characteristics and its chronological distribution. The clear distinction between this group and Median pottery, together with its concentration in Pish-i Kuh and the surrounding region, has led some scholars to associate this local production tradition with the cultural sphere of Ellipi. In particular, as proposed by Medvedskaya, this pottery tradition, which was concentrated west of the Garin mountain range, may have been connected with a local political and cultural structure that predated Median expansion into the region. Therefore, even if the Baba Djan III material cannot be regarded as direct evidence for Ellipi, it may still be interpreted as representing a distinctive local material culture that developed within the geographical area generally associated with the kingdom. Simultaneously, stronger conclusions will require stronger stratigraphic, analytical, and regional comparative evidence.

The cultural context of Luristan places this discussion within a broader framework. Although the region appears geographically mountainous and fragmented, it was never an isolated area due to its position along the routes connecting Mesopotamia, Elam, the Iranian plateau, and northwestern Iran. The principal passes used by Assyrian armies, long-distance trade routes, seasonal transhumant movement, and access to metal resources turned Luristan into a zone of multidirectional circulation and interaction. Therefore, the material culture tradition observed in Luristan should not be understood as the product of a homogeneous cultural model spreading from a single centre, but rather as the outcome of long-term relationships among different power centre, mountain communities, and regional networks. The stronger Elamite influences visible in southern and eastern Luristan, together with the Assyrian and northern Syrian connections evident in the north and north-west, further confirm this multi-centred cultural structure. In this context, Ellipi should not be viewed merely as a political name preserved in Assyrian inscriptions. It is more appropriate to regard Ellipi as a local centre of power that emerged within the geographical setting of Luristan and the western Zagros. The historical significance of Ellipi lies in the way it makes visible the forms of interaction between large imperial powers and local mountain communities. Similarly, Luristan should be understood not simply as an archaeological region defined by the Luristan bronzes, but as a dynamic historical landscape shaped by mobility, local production traditions, and frontier geographies.

Considering all this evidence, establishing a definitive and unidirectional equation between the Kingdom of Ellipi and Luristan does not seem possible at present. Nevertheless, when Ellipi is placed largely within the Pish-i Kuh region and its surroundings, considered together with the distribution of the Baba Djan III local production tradition and the position of Luristan within the Assyrian-Elamite-Median interaction zone, it becomes clear that Ellipi constitutes a key concept for understanding the local cultural and political formations of the western Zagros.

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