The Kurkh Monoliths (879-853 BC) are two Assyrian stelae from the reign of Ashurnasirpal II and his son Shalmaneser III, discovered by John G. Taylor in 1861 at the site of Kurkh (modern Üçtepe, Diyarbakır Turkey) (1). They are now both on display in the British Museum. Both stelae record the annals of the kings along with a large relief of the king.

The Shalmaneser III monolith contains a description of the victory (sixth year) of Shalmaneser III at the battle of Qarqar (also Karkar) on the Orontes River (northern Syria) in 853/854 BC over the Syrian allies lead by “Adad (ili IM)-‘idri (= Hadadezer) of Damascus, with Ahab of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (2) and other kings as vassals.” (3) A portion of the Annals of Shalmaneser III reads:

I destroyed, devastated, and set fire to Karkar, his royal city. <Irhuîenî> brought twelve kings to his support; they came against me to offer battle and fight: 1,200 chariots, 1,200 cavalry, and 20,000 soldiers belonging to Hadad-zezer of Damascus; 700 chariots, 700 cavalry, and 10,000 [or 20,000] soldiers belonging to Irhuîeni of Hama; 2,000 chariots, and 10,000 soldiers belonging to Ahab, the Israelite [A-ha-ab-bu Sir-ila-a-a]; 500 soldiers belonging to the Gueans; 1,000 soldiers belonging to the Musreans; 10 chariots and 10,000 soldiers belonging to the Irkanateans; 200 soldiers belonging to Matinuba’il the Arvadite; 200 soldiers belonging to the Usanateans; 30 chariots and [ ],000 soldiers belonging to Adunu-ba’il the Shianeans; 1,000 camels belonging to Gindibu’ the Arabian; and [ ],000 soldiers [belonging to] Ba’sa, son of Ruhubi, the Ammonite. Trusting in the exalted might which the lord Assur had given me, in the mighty weapons, which Nergal, who goes before me, had presented to me, I battled with them. I routed them from Karkar to the city of Cilzau, killing 14,000 of their soldiers, raining destruction on them like Adad. I scattered their bodies far and wide, and covered the face of the desolate plain with their vast armies. Using my weapons, I made their blood to flow down the valleys(?). The plain was too small to let their bodies fall, the wide countryside was used up in burying them. I spanned the Orontes with their bodies like a bridge(?). In that battle I took from them their chariots, cavalry, and tamed horses. (4)

The battle of Karkar does not appear in the Old Testament and various explanations have been offered to place it into the narrative. However, according to the Old Testament, Ahab had overthrown Ben-hadad, the Syrian leader, who came to lay siege to Samaria, with just 7,000 troops (under the leadership of thirty-two kings, 1 Kings 20:1-34). (5) Ahab’s base of operation for his troops was likely the city of Jezreel. (6) Luckenbill states that popular view, although he provides his own explanation:

According to the prevailing interpretation of the Hebrew account in the light of the Assyrian records, the ‘two years’ truce mentioned in I Kings 22:1 follow immediately upon the defeat of Benhadad at Aphek, and leave room for Ahab’s presence at Karkar. (7)

But as Luckenbill points out, according to the Assyrian account Ahab was an ally of the king of Damascus. Wiseman provides a possible explanation:

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Aram turned south, perhaps in an attempt to gain new trade routes, since the north had been cut off by the wars of the Assyrian Ashur-nasirapli II (883–859 BC) and his successor Shalmaneser III (859–829 BC). Some think the wars recorded here took place early in Ahab’s reign, to allow time for the mellowing of Israel’s relation with Aram when Ahab contributed to the coalition which faced Assyria at the battle of Qarqar in 853 BC (Bright). Yeivin argues that the first war was early but the second followed after Qarqar, but this is unlikely in view of 22:1. The aggression of Ben-Hadad II (Hadadezer, Assyr. Adad-'idri) may have aimed to secure his southern flank while he faced the Assyrian drive to the Mediterranean c. 888–885 BC. There is no need to view the prophetic allusions as secondary, for their interpretation of events is consistent with that of the Deuteronomic historian throughout. (8)

The Kurkh stele of Shalmaneser III verifies the historical accuracy of Ahab, king of Israel and the fact that he had a large army. As Ackerman points out:

The size of Ahab’s contribution to the anti-Shalmaneser fighting force at Qarqar indicates, for example, that Israel was still a major military power in Syria-Palestine at the end of the first half of the ninth century B.C.E. (9)

Footnotes: