



TEXTS, TRADE, AND TRAVELERS

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Zimri-Lim had been on the throne of Mari for less than ten years, weathering tribal insurrections and attacks from neighboring powers, when he made his famous trip to the Mediterranean (fig. 31). He could not refuse a summons from his embattled father-in-law, Yarim-Lim, who ruled from Aleppo in a large kingdom in Syria called Yamhad. Zimri-Lim (ca. 1775–1760 B.C.) assembled more than four thousand men and sealed in coffers a goodly portion of his movable wealth, including precious gifts and tin ingots. Together with an enormous retinue that included soldiers, officers, wives, concubines, administrators, artisans, and servants, the king set forth on a journey that covered hundreds of kilometers and lasted about six months. Zimri-Lim was not the only ruler of this era to embark on such an expedition; the legendary Gilgamesh had sought to make his name in the Cedar Forest and the troops of Zimri-Lim’s predecessor, his father Yahdun-Lim, had waded in the Mediterranean. But the voyage of Zimri-Lim is exceptional, not least because its itinerary is charted by administrative documents, to which we shall return.

PEOPLE

By the end of the third millennium B.C., much of western Asia had fallen into increased political fragmentation, perhaps as a result of climatic changes and environmental degradation. A major shift in the power structure had occurred: from the flanks of the Zagros Mountains westward to the Mediterranean, the landscape was dotted with city-states, each with a relatively small area of influence. Dynasties rose and collapsed and territories swelled and eroded faster than the hopes and fears of their leaders. We recognize the existence of many ethnic groups in this area—Elamites in the Iranian plateau, Hurrians in northeastern Mesopotamia (which likely also included related peoples such as the Turukkus and the Lullus), Indo-Europeans (among them the Hittites and the Luwians of Anatolia), and Kassites, the future rulers of Babylon—but the major stock was Semitic, with remnants of Akkadians in the

Babylonian south, and Assyrians, best known for their merchant colonies in central Anatolia. Arameans may have made an early appearance as Sutu nomads and later as Ahlamus.

Our sources, however, tell us most about the Amorites. We apply this ethnic term to several different tribal groups. Some regarded themselves as heirs to the third-millennium B.C. Sumerian and Akkadian dynasties. (One Amorite king of Mari, Yasmah-Addu, is scolded for speaking only Akkadian!) Others, such as the Numha and the Yamutbal, were pastoralists who gathered about the walls of fortified areas. The largest groups belonged to the Yaminite (southern) and Sim’alite (northern) coalitions, and these in turn embraced subtribes and clans, each with ambitions to overtake neighboring cities. What they did have in common, however, was a language: Amorite, the “Western” branch of Semitic. Amorites spoke their language in a variety of dialects, but strangely hardly used it when writing letters on cuneiform tablets. (We know the language mostly from names, nouns, and occasionally verbs.) They also had an extended kinship organization that they adapted to political life, with kings and vassals referring to each other as “fathers, sons, and brothers,” exchanging gifts that included garments and beloved daughters, and orchestrating symbolic arrangements at ceremonial tables.

TRADE AND EXCHANGE

In this period of obligatory gift-giving, regulated by strict etiquette as well as by commercial value,¹ we have more details about what was exchanged than what was traded, the difference being that the former included objects and materials swapped between rulers. Merchants would supply materials from one region where there was a surplus to another where there was a shortage. Among the goods and products they bought and sold were people (slaves), livestock, grain, oils, wine, and honey. Raw materials—wool, leather, wood, reed, stones, metals—were purchased and processed locally or acquired as basic stock (mostly textiles and pottery). We learn from the Mari archives that merchants also played a crucial role in restoring harmony after wars, moving freely across frontiers to ransom prisoners and then returning them to their homes for profit.

Musicians came to Mari from Qatna, Aleppo, and Carchemish; but traffic in talent moved also in the opposite direction. We know, for example, that Mari sent singers to Aleppo. Women from the courts of defeated enemies were sent to Mari maestros who trained them to chant, sing, dance, and play instruments.² Male musicians often attempted to escape their employment for more favorable situations.³ It may have been to prevent them from escaping that young men were sometimes blinded before being handed over for instruction.⁴

The traffic in professional artists and artisans was not limited to musicians; indeed, any specialist was a candidate—physicians, translators, incantation specialists, gymnasts, seamstresses, and all manner of kitchen workers. There is a whole category of individuals whose expertise was needed to sharpen the solemnity of religious ceremonies and perform at festivals. Not far from Mari, at Der, an annual ritual to honor Ishtar was held before the king, with priests and choristers chanting dirges and laments. The program included a precisely choreographed performance of fire and sword swallowers, jugglers, wrestlers, acrobats, and masqueraders. These performers may have been local, but we can also imagine that they made the circuit from one fixed festival to another. Their services were rewarded with gifts of jewelry, garments, and meat.⁵

In the Mari archives, we read also about the movement of smiths, weavers, masons, dressers of menhirs, jewelers, scribes (especially those with a knowledge of Sumerian), barbers, animal fatteners, and vintners. But most frequently recorded is the transfer of diviners and physicians, no doubt because the age was troubled by warfare and the epidemics that ensued. We know many such professionals by name and can even follow their careers as they shuttled from one trouble spot to another. Diviners would decipher the will of heaven by examining the innards of a sheep, and no army would set forth without a diviner in tow—and presumably also a flock of sheep. We read about diviners dispatched by allied rulers meeting far from home to collate auguries. Physicians attended the sick, and the best among them would travel long distances to collect a particularly efficacious herb. Not surprisingly, we occasionally find diviners and physicians working in tandem:

*My lord should give strict orders to make Meranum, the physician, reach me by boat so that he can join me quickly. My lord should also send along with him (the diviner) Ishkhi-Addu. As Ishkhi-Addu takes the omens, Meranum will dress wounds. My lords must give strict orders so that these men will get here quickly by boat or by chariot.*⁶

Elsewhere, we read of the same physician, Meranum, being fetched to attend to an elderly chief musician, who was suffering from debilitating anxiety.⁷

Some physicians earned prestige because they practiced abroad. A provincial governor requests that a physician from Mardaman (in Hurrian territory) clear an obstinate abscess

behind the ear,⁸ and a letter from Zimri-Lim's personal valet indicates that such a reputation was well earned:

*My lord had written me about the [herbal] drug for an inflamed blister by a Mardaman physician attached to the administrative bureau. I have placed under seal the drug that has come to me from the mountain regions, and I have sent to my lord with Lagamal-abum these physicians and their drugs. Now my lord has already tried the drug against an inflamed blister by the physician attached to the administrative bureau. I myself have tried the drug for an inflamed blister by the Mardaman physician, and it was effective. Together with Hammi-shagish, I have tried it several times, and it was effective. Abuma-nasi drank it, and it was effective.*⁹

Exchanges among the elite included ceremonial weapons and finished products such as garments, shoes and belts, jewelry, and furniture. There was also traffic in the unusual (glass), the artistic (vessels shaped as animals, real or imagined), and the distinctive (models of Cretan ships). Much in demand were seasonals (desert truffles) and exotic animals (wild cats, bears, elephant hides, ostriches and their eggs). Anything that entered or left the palace as a gift was duly registered, for example: “3 oxen, 12 sheep, stored and sealed in 2 containers and 15 reed baskets; to remove from a depot at the Terqa palace, for taking to Mari. Assigned to Palusu-lirik; at the loft of the ‘Meat-storeroom.’”¹⁰

Occasionally, a surplus of precious goods would lead a king to sell rather than hoard them for future disposal. To do so, diplomats were commissioned to secure the best price during their journeys, and they eagerly tried to gain favor with their lord, as this letter to Zimri-Lim makes clear:

About the rock-crystal that my lord conveyed to me and the price he set for it, writing “Regarding the price for this rock-crystal: it could be higher than what I am setting it for you, but not less.” This is what my lord wrote me. However, on the price of the rock-crystal that my lord has set for me, what if people lower it by 10 or 20 shekels, what would my decision be? My lord has sent me this letter as if I had not been part of the palace! In fact, I had said, “I need to sell the rock-crystal that my lord sent me at a higher price than what he had set for me; I should fetch 10 to 20 shekels more!”

*Now then, according to my lord's instruction, I will sell this rock-crystal and I shall use as much money as my lord had assigned me to purchase either tin or lapis-lazuli, depending on what I find available. It is possible that rock-crystal is abundant or scarce in this land; but who can tell? Regarding what my lord has instructed, I will not be negligent.*¹¹

Kings sent statues of themselves to distant gods and thrones to newly installed vassals, a gift symbolic of their authority. Earlier in the second millennium B.C., horses of specific regions (Qatna and Carchemish) or of specific colors (white) were highly sought. Their care received the highest attention, with

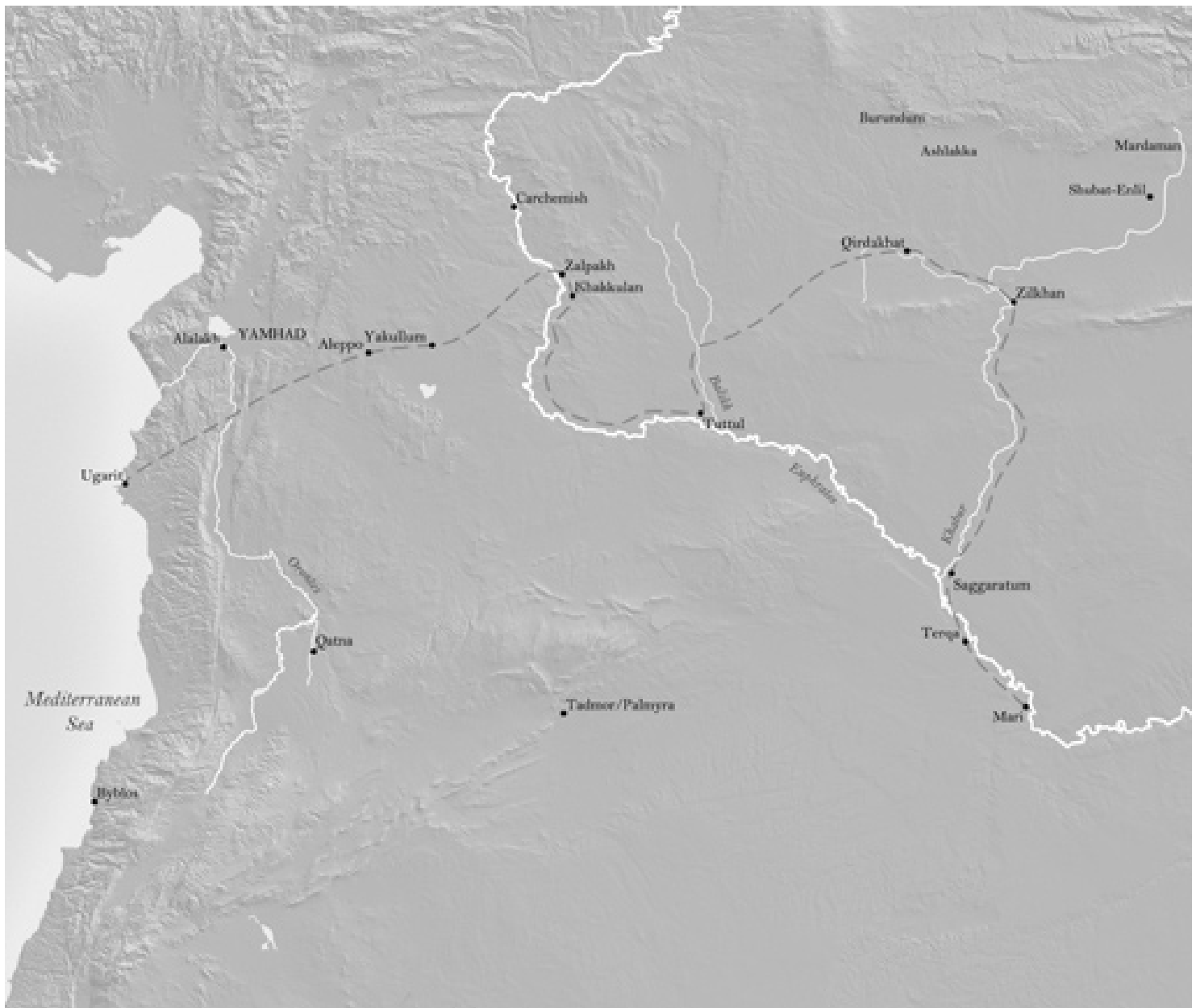


Figure 31. Map of Zimri-Lim's route from Mari to the Mediterranean.

one letter from Zimri-Lim urging that Qatna horses be kept in the largest space *within* the palace—one decorated with wall paintings, no less—where they could avoid direct sunlight.¹² In another letter the king of Qatna complains bitterly to his peer in Ekallatum about lack of reciprocity:

This matter is not for discussion; yet I must say it now and vent my feelings. You are the great king. When you placed a request with me for 2 horses, I indeed had them conveyed to you. But you, you sent me [only] 20 pounds of tin. Without doubt, when you sent this paltry amount of tin, you were not seeking to be honorable with me. Had you planned sending nothing at all—by the god of my father!—would I be angry?

Among us in Qatna, the value of such horses is 600 shekels [that is, 10 pounds] of silver. But you sent me just 20 pounds of tin! What would anyone hearing this say? He could not

*deem us equal! This house is your house. What is lacking in your house that a brother cannot fulfill the need of his equal? If you do not plan to send me any tin, I should not have been in the least upset over it. Are you not the great king? Why have you done this? This house is your house!*¹³

TRAVEL

Travel during this period was extensive, on rivers, by sea, and across the land. The great rivers, the Tigris and especially the Euphrates, their tributaries, and the many canals cut from them teemed with boats, barges, and rafts shuttling merchants, soldiers, and diplomats up and down the Syro-Mesopotamian heartland. Some cities, such as Mari, profited from hefty imposts on river traffic. The king of Aleppo, in a letter in the Mari archives, recalls sending five hundred boats to control

Diniktum, across the Tigris toward Elam, an expedition beyond our easy fathom.

To the west the Mediterranean connected western Asia, Egypt, Anatolia, Cyprus (the source of much copper), and the Aegean. Although we do not know the vocabulary for sea travel until the Late Bronze Age, the presence of merchants and dragomans in such places as Ugarit assures us that this sea trade was already active.

To reach some cities, however, such as Aleppo in Syria or Kanesh in central Anatolia, and when hostilities prevented riverine connections, feet and hooves were necessary. To enter Qatna from the Mari region, caravans traveled along the Euphrates, veering sharply westward into the Syrian Desert, reaching Palmyra before heading to Nashala and Qatna. The journey took about twelve days and was made on donkeys, since camels had not yet been widely domesticated. This is the route that the armies of Shamshi-Adad (Samsi-Addu) likely took on their mission to the Beqa' Valley or when his troops went to fetch a Qatna bride for his son.

Overland routes were heavily used, with caravan stops along the way; the itineraries are occasionally preserved in letters. There were many reasons for setting forth, but essentially they fall into four categories:

1. *Commercial.* To eager consumers, merchants distributed materials from distant locales—lapis lazuli was imported from Afghanistan and copper from Sinai and Cyprus. Mesopotamia, a breadbasket, imported practically everything else. While most distributions were done by relay, many merchants themselves traveled far beyond their hometowns. In doing so, they were inviting targets for brigands who, not infrequently, were supported by local rulers. To give themselves clout, merchants often formed associations, selecting an “overseer” to represent their interests. They also benefited from protective agreements between rulers. The shielding of merchants from abusive hosts is described in an epic that featured the great Sargon of Akkad (ca. 2334–2279 B.C.), who allegedly drove his armies deep into Anatolia to punish their oppressors. The Mari tablets include frequent reports of harm that came to merchants in transit, occasionally initiated by rulers themselves.¹⁴ But there is also the statement by a high officer about the freedom merchants enjoyed in crossing borders, both in peace and in war, gathering gossip along the way.¹⁵

Merchants paid all sorts of tolls (and likely also bribes) when traversing territory or navigating past major cities, and officials kept a sharp eye on smuggling, occasionally using the gods or their emblems to uncover illicit traffic in slaves. We can reconstruct the affairs of many individual merchants from tablets said to come from Dilbat, Larsa, Kish, Sippar, Ur, and other Babylonian towns. But our best example of long-distance trading comes to us from the Old Assyrian period (see pp. 70–73).

2. *Diplomatic.* Many activities kept the powers of western Asia tightly knit. Though largely administrative, the palace archives of Mari include hundreds of letters that flesh out a world in which movement to and from capitals by ambassadors and messengers was recorded with exceptional detail. Light is shed even on the private undertakings of rulers investing in foreign lands. Kings would maintain large estates in friendly territories, run by trusted officials and overflowing with the necessities of the good life. Hammurabi of Babylon settled one of his sons in such a unit near Mari, thus providing him with a useful diplomatic apprenticeship. These units also functioned as banks, with payments made upon handing over receipts. Kings are even known to have purchased entire towns in areas far from their homeland, likely hedging against politically troubled times. Late in his career, Zimri-Lim purchased towns near Alalakh, close to the Mediterranean coast. The traffic required to maintain such long-distance purchases was undoubtedly impressive.

There is ample testimony also about the art of diplomacy. Ambassadors were charged with smoothing out relations with—no less than spying on—allies, overlords, and vassals. Rarely did they travel without gifts. And when they reached their destination, they would collect for their sovereign the same, a form of recycled wealth. Their appearances at court were highly choreographed, with seating arrangements reflecting the status of their lords.

A fine example of a grand send-off comes from Shamshi-Adad, writing to his son in Mari:

The day after sending this letter of mine, the messengers from Dilmun (Bahrain) will leave Shubat-Enlil (Tell Leilan). Wealthy men at their arrival should hire 10 poor folks who can accompany them, so that with their wages they could support their people, therefore traveling happily. If you send off the wealthy [by themselves], they will simply abandon the caravan. You must simply not send the wealthy off.
[To be sent]

–30 rams, 30 liters of fine oil, 60 liters of linseed oil—poured into leather bottles, (plus) 3 liters of juniper seed, and boxwood (essence);

–For the 10 Dilmun (messengers) and their servants: leather bottles (outrés), 1 per person; shoes, 2 each

–For servants of mine: leather bottles, 1 each; shoes, 2 each;

–For 7 craftsmen: leather bottles, 1 each; shoes, 2 each;

–For the 10 men who accompany them from Shubat-Enlil: leather bottles, 1 each; shoes, 2 each;

–For the 10 load-donkey: 10 ropes, each 1.5 cubits.

*Total: 52 leather bottles; 64 pairs of shoes, one large bag; 10 ropes, of 1.5 cubits. Let it be arranged as per this tablet.*¹⁶

3. *Dynastic marriages.* With western Asia fractured into many powers, each with satellite dependents, interdynastic marriage

became widespread. Princesses, sisters, and daughters of rulers normally married below their own status, thus retaining importance in the palace of vassal husbands.

Daughters and sisters of kings often functioned as pawns in diplomatic marriages, and Zimri-Lim had many to give away. Some were honored in their new homes, while others were humiliated and wrote back heartbreaking notes. They were all, however, expected to be the eyes and ears of their kin, and to aid in this purpose, scribes were often included in the dowries. Zimri-Lim gave his sister Liqtum in marriage to one of his early supporters, Adalshenni, king of Burundum, a town near Tur Abdin, a mountainous region in northern Syria, which was a major stop along the trade route between Assyria and Anatolia. Liqtum apparently used her scribe to argue her husband's cause, and we have a letter from Zimri-Lim responding to her efforts:

*About what you wrote me on establishing peace and good-will between me and Adalshenni and on engaging in frank discussions between us; who would not want to have peace and good-will? I am herewith sending a long communiqué to Adalshenni about establishing peace and good-will. May peace and good-will be established between us.*¹⁷

But he also admonishes her:

*In the land where you dwell, there are many ostriches; why have you not sent to me ostriches?*¹⁸

Marriage was achieved after much negotiation, requiring frequent diplomatic travel.¹⁹ Marriage was also the occasion of broad disbursement of gifts: father to daughter (*nidittum*; “dowry”), groom to bride (*terhatum*; “bride-wealth”), and in-laws to each other (*biblum*; “marriage gifts”). Feasting promoted bonding and continued for days on end. The Mari archives contain records of many such transactions, with bride-wealth and dowry lists that included garments, jewelry, furniture, servants, and even scribes. We know of negotiations between the houses of Qatna and Mari that resulted in the princess Beltum being taken to a husband who did not fully appreciate her—especially as she had cost his father 4 talents (240 pounds) of silver.²⁰ In Mari, Beltum went dancing one midafternoon in an open courtyard, suffering a severe sunstroke.²¹

Our fullest documentation, however, concerns Zimri-Lim's own marriage to Shiptu, daughter of the king of Aleppo. The *terhatum*, sent through intermediaries, included necklaces of gold and lapis lazuli, with intricate clasps and precious stones, pectorals, leather objects, and hundreds of animals.²² How she arrived at Mari is revealed in a series of letters the ambassadors wrote to Zimri-Lim during the mission.²³

4. *Military.* The role of armies in promoting trade contacts is not always apparent, since their primary goal was to intimidate, in the process of which they would maim, capture, and ransack. Armies marched on their bellies, plundering food and equip-

ment in enemy territory. But they also took along a vast array of auxiliaries, among them diviners, gods (as images), cooks, smiths, and, for all sorts of reasons, women. The hope was always to complete a mission in one season, around springtime; some operations, however, took armies far distances and assignments could stretch on for months. Troops could also be stuck in garrisons for years, keeping watch on unstable vassals.²⁴

Nevertheless, in its wake, a successful military venture often led to the dispersal of people and goods. When Zimri-Lim conquered Ashlakka from his rebellious son-in-law, he sent to Mari his share of the spoils: more than one hundred women from the harem of the defeated king, among them the victims of previous conquests. Some of the women, bringing their talents to Mari, served as musicians, but most were assigned to weaving, making garments that were later sold by the palace or offered as gifts.

THE TRIP WESTWARD

We return now to Zimri-Lim's trip to the Mediterranean with which we began this essay (fig. 31). During his reign the king was practically always on the road, inspecting strongholds, bringing peace to warring allies, visiting daughters given to vassals as “trophy” wives, and paying homage to diverse gods. This trip westward, however, was not exactly a social outing. The ruler who summoned him, his father-in-law Yarim-Lim, had conferred on him status and legitimacy by giving him Shiptu, his daughter from a concubine, and in return Yarim-Lim was now calling on him to help against a pesky opponent.

We know that the trip began at the turn of the twelfth month of the Mari calendar, not easily matched to ours but likely just as the rains were slackening and before the brutal summer was to set in. So let us imagine it was mid-April when the caravan lumbered out of Mari. The king stopped by a number of towns that were under his control, first along the Euphrates and then up the Khabur. As he moved up the river, he received gifts—mostly jewelry—from a number of his vassals. This phase took about a month. The next phase brought him farther upriver, and by mid-May, he was in territory under the control of Haya-Sumu, a vassal made loyal by marrying two of Zimri-Lim's daughters.

Three weeks later we find the king having crossed to the region of the Balikh River, though some of his emissaries must already have reached the Euphrates near present-day Tell Munbaqa. Nearby was a temple to the god Dagan, and Zimri-Lim paid him homage. He also offered his first gifts to Yarim-Lim and his primary wife, Gashera. There were also gifts to the great god Addu (Adad) of Aleppo.

Zimri-Lim stayed in Aleppo, his host's capital, for the next few weeks, but toward the end of June, he was again on the move, making his way toward the seacoast and sending gifts far and wide in Syria; tin was the most sought-after present, as it was a major component of bronze. We have the names of

a number of local rulers who received his gifts, including Ibni-Addu, king of Hazor.

Nearly three months after he had left Mari, Zimri-Lim came to Ugarit. It was the first week of July, and the sea breezes must have helped sustain him and his court during the hot days. We do not know if Ugarit was yet the commercial metropolis it came to be in the Late Bronze Age, but undoubtedly it was under Aleppo's sphere of influence. From Ugarit, Zimri-Lim continued to dispatch gifts, some to people who had already benefited from his largesse, but also to new recipients, including a songstress, Niqmi-Lanasi, who was a member of Yarim-Lim's court. No doubt because his emissaries were returning from their missions, we begin to read about gifts, especially wine, from such cities as Qatna, Hazor, Ulme, and Byblos.²⁵ Egypt—unless it is concealed under an undeciphered name—is strikingly absent from the cuneiform records of the time, when it was still ruled by the glorious Dynasty 12.

During his stay in Ugarit, Zimri-Lim likely visited neighboring villages. It would appear that one of these locales, a town called Alahtum, took his fancy as a safe haven where he might end his days. A few years later we find his emissary negotiating its purchase, and in spite of the incompetence of his agent, Zimri-Lim eventually succeeded in obtaining his wish. His hold over Alahtum, however, could not have lasted long; for if that town proves to be Alalakh (Tell Atchana, near the Orontes in the Amuq Valley; see pp. 197–98), it reverted back to Aleppo's control fairly soon after the demise of Mari.

Zimri-Lim's stay in Ugarit lasted an entire month, after which he retraced his steps before heading home. Soon he was back in Aleppo. The administrative archives on this leg of the journey begin to diminish around the beginning of September. By this time, however, Zimri-Lim had received

urgent news of insurrections abroad, likely fomented by his erstwhile allies the Elamites. A gruesome report reached him, too, about the murder and beheading of one of his faithful vassals, Qarni-Lim of Andariq. Zimri-Lim was at his capital by the end of the month.²⁶ The vacation was over.

1. See Lerouxel 2002.
2. Dossin 1978 (ARM 10 126); Durand 1997–2000 (LAPO 18 1166), pp. 349–51.
3. Durand 1997–2000 (LAPO 16 11–14).
4. Charpin et al. 1988 (ARM 26 297).
5. Sasson 1968.
6. Durand 1988 (ARM 26 125).
7. Dossin 1950 (ARM 1 115); Durand 1997–2000 (LAPO 16 168), p. 169.
8. Birot 1974 (ARM 14 3); Durand 1997–2000 (LAPO 16 172), p. 307.
9. A.2216; Durand 1997–2000 (LAPO 16 171), pp. 306–7.
10. Bardet et al. 1984 (ARM 23 224).
11. A.2993+; Durand 1997–2000 (LAPO 18 855), pp. 15–17.
12. Dossin 1978 (ARM 10 147); Durand 1997–2000 (LAPO 18 1110), pp. 290–92.
13. Dossin 1952 (ARM 5 20); Durand 1997–2000 (LAPO 16 256), pp. 403–5.
14. Charpin et al. 1988 (ARM 26 532).
15. A.350+; Durand 1997–2000 (LAPO 16 333), pp. 518–20.
16. Dossin 1950 (ARM 1 17); Durand 1997–2000 (LAPO 16 417), pp. 610–12.
17. Dossin 1978 (ARM 10 140); Durand 1997–2000 (LAPO 18 1184), pp. 372–73.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Two fine overviews of the archives on Mari marriages are Lafont 1987 and Lafont 2001, pp. 322–25.
20. Durand 1997–2000 (LAPO 18 1005–13), pp. 169–78.
21. Charpin et al. 1988 (ARM 26 298).
22. *Ibid.* Limet 1986 (ARM 25 616); improved edition in Durand 1988 (ARM 26/1), pp. 100–101.
23. The story is presented as one example of interdynastic marriages in Sasson 2006.
24. We have the complaint of a man kept five years in one such post; see Charpin et al. 1988 (ARM 26 345).
25. The exchange of tin for wine seems to have been an accepted barter, as documented from an earlier generation; see Charpin and Ziegler 1997.
26. See Villard 1986.