Conor Kostick

Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities

kosticc@tcd.ie

Thanks to Rhonda McGovern, Francis Ludlow and Chris Morris

A Case Study of Extreme Weather Shock and Warfare: The Fall of the Kingdom of Israel c.720 BCE

Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

Climates of Conflict in Ancient Babylonia

Principal Investigator: Dr Francis Ludlow

IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

The Northern Kingdom of Israel existed c.950–720BCE, with Samara as its capital for most of this time

Timeline

Assyrian Rulers

Tiglath-Pileser III 745–726 BCE
Shalmaneser V 726 to 722 BCE (son of Tiglath-Pileser)
Sargon II 722 to 705 BCE (brother of Shalmaneser)

Known events:

- Civil War in Assyria in 722
- A rebellion led by Yau-bi'di of Hamas involves Samara
- Assyria conquers Samara by 720

Uncertain events:

- Did Shalmaneser earlier capture Samara after a three-year siege?
- What happened to Hoshea, the last king?

“Climate in the Iron Age II–III period remained stable in ancient Israel. We can therefore assume that no specific impulses from a (sudden) change in climate would have influenced the course of events leading to the end of the kingdom.”

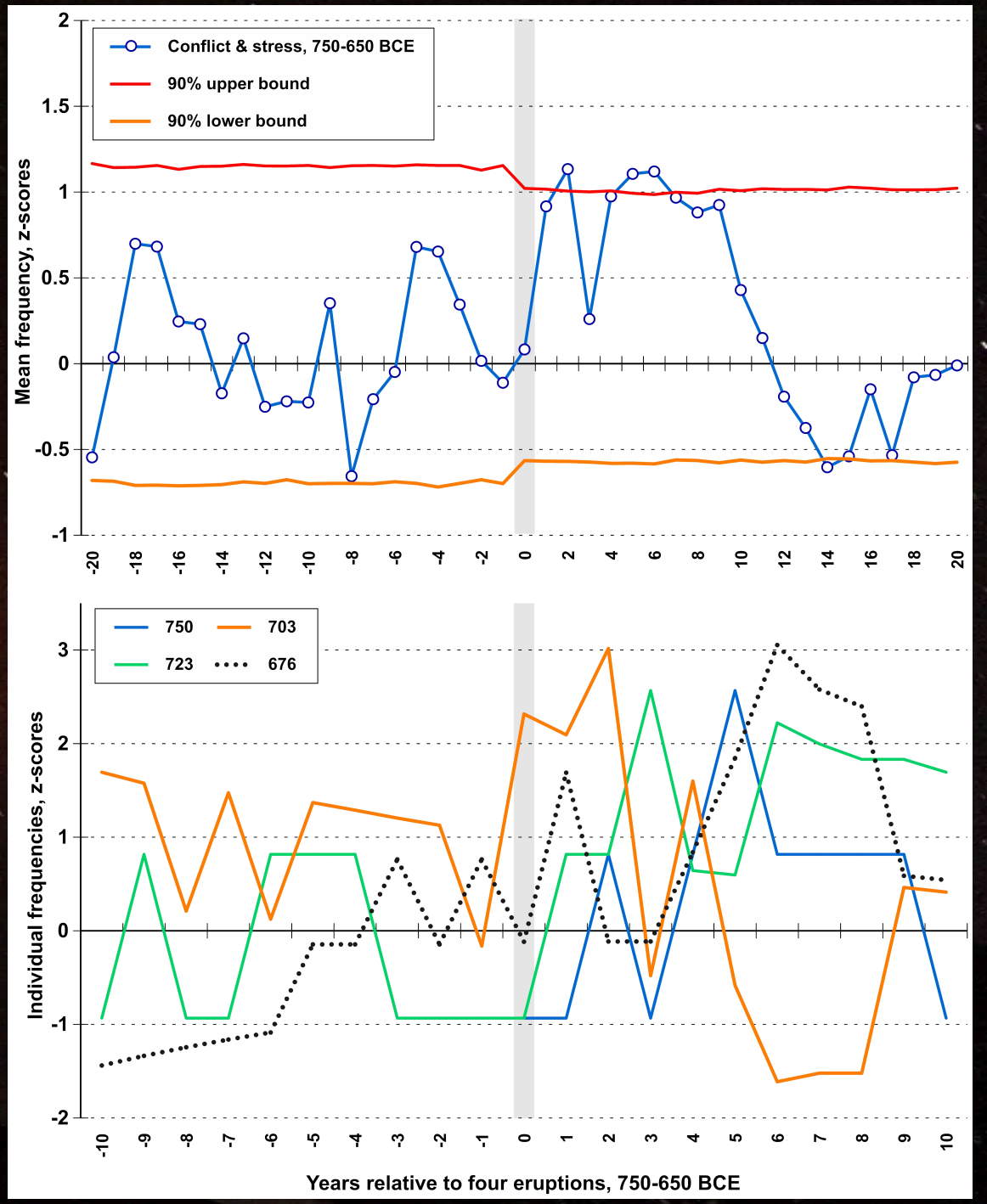
B. Becking, ‘How to Encounter an Historical Problem? – 722 – 720 as a Case Study’, in Shuichi Hasegawa, Christopher Levin and Karen Radner (eds.) *The Last Days of the Kingdom of Israel* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019) , pp. 17-34: 23.

Stress Frequencies 750-650 superposed across four eruption years:

750, 723, 703, 676

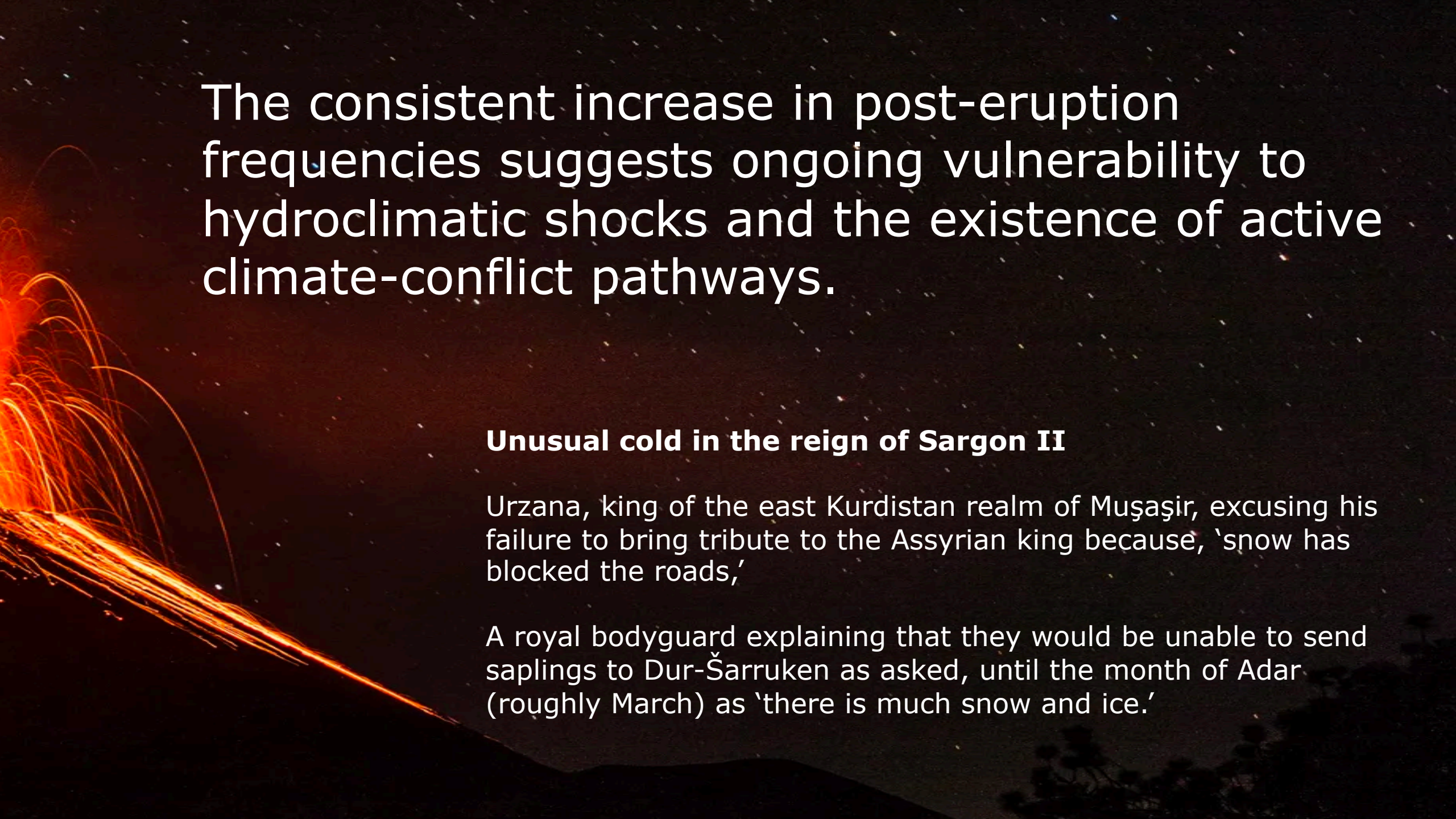
+/-2, derived from Antarctic sulphate deposition (WAIS, J. Cole-Dai *et al*.)

The 723 event in particular exceeds the deposition from the great 1600 (Huaynaputina, Peru), 1884 (Krakatoa, Indonesia) and 1991 (Pinatubo, Philippines) tropical eruptions in the same core. All are known for environmental and human impacts.



115 stress events in 101 years surveyed

Major wars; minor wars; civil wars; famine; epidemics; locust outbreaks; drought; cold; harmfully high or unseasonable flooding; diminished sunlight; forced migrations; and two proxies for socio-political disruption: indications that no New Year ceremony occurred, and years in which the king availed of a ‘substitute’.



The consistent increase in post-eruption frequencies suggests ongoing vulnerability to hydroclimatic shocks and the existence of active climate-conflict pathways.

Unusual cold in the reign of Sargon II

Urzana, king of the east Kurdistan realm of Muşaşir, excusing his failure to bring tribute to the Assyrian king because, ‘snow has blocked the roads,’

A royal bodyguard explaining that they would be unable to send saplings to Dur-Šarruken as asked, until the month of Adar (roughly March) as ‘there is much snow and ice.’

New Narrative

The *Assur Charter* (a pro-Sargon source) suggests internal revolt arose from Shalmaneser's imposition of tax and corvée on the cities of Ashur and Harran. With new taxes coinciding with extreme weather and corresponding agricultural difficulties, the likelihood these were indeed motive for a revolt sufficient to overthrow the king may have been enhanced.

Viewed from the west, an Assyria weakened by civil war and harsh weather could partly explain why Yau-bi'di's rebellion might have gained greater support than at less challenging times.

This would regardless prove a miscalculation: with consolidation of his position and the easing of the weather, Sargon II was able to devastate the Westland within two years of coming to power.