

Tell Tayinat's Great Lion

by Timothy P. Harrison

The University of Toronto's Tayinat Archaeological Project (TAP) unearthed a monumental gate complex to the citadel of Kunulua, capital of the Neo-Hittite Kingdom of Patina in south-east Turkey. Associated with the gate, but found discarded out of position, was a magnificently carved stone lion figure, measuring approximately 1.3 m in height and 1.6 m in length. The lion is poised in a seated position, with ears back, claws extended and roaring. A second sculptural piece, part of a large statue base, depicts a human figure flanked by lions, an iconic ancient Near Eastern cultural motif known as the "Master and the Animals", which symbolized the civilizational imposition of order over the chaotic forces of the natural world.

The gate complex is reminiscent of the great staircase excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley in 1911 at the royal Hittite capital at Carchemish. The presence of lions, or sphinxes, and colossal statues astride the Master and Animals motif in the citadel gateways of the Neo-Hittite royal cities of Iron Age Syro-Anatolia continued a Bronze Age Hittite tradition. It accentuated their symbolic role as boundary zones, and the role of the king as the divinely appointed guardian, or "gate keeper", of the community. By the 9th and 8th centuries BCE, these elaborately decorated

gateways had come to serve as dynastic parades, legitimizing the power of the ruling elite. The gate reliefs also formed linear narratives, guiding their audiences between the human and divine realms, with the king serving as the link between the two worlds.

The Tayinat gate complex appears to have been destroyed following the Assyrian conquest of 738 BCE, when the area was paved over and converted into the central courtyard of an Assyrian sacred precinct. Smashed remains of stelae carved in Hittite Luwian Hieroglyphic script hint of an earlier Neo-Hittite religious complex that might have once faced the gateway approach. Scholars have speculated that the reference to Calneh in Isaiah's oracle against Assyria alludes to its devastation of Kunulua (Tayinat). The destruction of the Luwian monuments and conversion of the area into an Assyrian religious complex may represent this historic event. The Tayinat lions also provide new insight into the innovative character and sophistication of the diminutive Iron Age states that emerged in the eastern Mediterranean in the aftermath of the collapse of the great civilizational powers of the Bronze Age at the end of the second millennium BCE. ☺



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