

# Lion-Adorned Monumental Gate Complex Unearthed at Tell Tayinat, Turkey

by Timothy P. Harrison

Excavations by the University of Toronto's Tayinat Archaeological Project (TAP) have unearthed the remains of a monumental gate complex that provided access to the citadel of Kunulua, capital of the Neo-Hittite Kingdom of Patina in southeast Turkey. Associated with the gate, but found discarded out of position, was a magnificently carved stone lion figure, measuring approximately 1.3m in height and 1.6m 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 civilisational imposition of order over the chaotic forces of the natural world.

The Tayinat gate complex is reminiscent of the great staircase excavated by the British archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley in 1911 at the contemporary royal Hittite capital at Carchemish. The great staircase, or citadel gate, at Carchemish was also adorned with lion sculptures, and it was approached via a long processional way flanked with ornately carved stone blocks, or orthostats, forming a monumental ceremonial approach to the citadel area.

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 that 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 9<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, these elaborately decorated gateways, with their ornately carved reliefs, 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 the site in 738 BCE, when the area was paved over and converted into the central courtyard of an Assyrian sacred precinct. The 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 long speculated that the reference to Calneh in Isaiah's oracle against Assyria alludes to their devastation of Kunulua (i.e., Tayinat). The destruction of the Luwian monuments and conversion of the area into an Assyrian religious complex may represent the physical manifestation of this historic event.

The stylistic features of the newly discovered lion closely



Stone lion sculpture that adorned the Tayinat citadel gate.  
(Photo Jennifer Jackson)

resemble those of a double-lion column base found in the 1930s in the entrance to one of the temples that formed the Assyrian sacred precinct. Whether reused, or carved during the Assyrian occupation of the site, these later lion figures now clearly belong to a local Neo-Hittite sculptural tradition that predated the arrival of the Assyrians, and were not the product of Assyrian cultural influence, as scholars have long assumed. The Tayinat lion thus provides new insights into the innovative character and cultural sophistication of the diminutive Iron Age states that emerged in the eastern Mediterranean in the aftermath of the collapse of the great civilisational powers of the Bronze Age at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE. □



The lion being transported to the Antakya Archaeological Museum.  
(Photo Lynn Welton)