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MONUMENTS, CIVIL WAR AND LOCAL COMMUNITIES: Archaeological Heritage in the Duhok Region (Kurdistan Region of Iraq). Part 1.

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During the last one and a half decade I spent several months in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, doing field research on the religious heritage and oral tradition of Iraqi Yezidis. In the framework of these research periods I have also visited heritage sites recalling the rich and multicolored past of a region which has housed many cultures and religions over the centuries. This part of Iraq, on the periphery of the glorious cultures of Antiquity, has attracted much less attention, both among archaeologists and tourists, than other parts of Iraq. In this paper I have chosen to describe sites that are either completely unknown or though (somewhat) known, appear to be vulnerable and may disappear or become further damaged. As my own work focuses on various aspects of intangible cultural heritage, I looked at how these heritage sites are "used" by locals today, both as places of touristic recreation and as sites which have a role in constructing memory, both as regards traditional oral history and modern nationalist discourse.

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2017 I spent two and a half months doing field research in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq with the support of a grant from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation.\(^1\) My research focused on the religious heritage and oral tradition of Iraqi Yezidis.\(^2\) Most of my time was devoted to making interviews and visiting Yezidi villages as well as refugee camps housing those Yezidis who escaped the ISIS attack on Sinjar (on the Iraqi-Syrian border) and took refuge in the Kurdistan Region in 2014. However, I also visited archaeological sites and monuments in the region. I was interested not only in the sites themselves as physical monuments of the past, but also in their place in contemporary Kurdish society, culture and historical discourse. As I was based in Duhok, a northern town at the foot of the Kurdish mountains, which offers easy access to many Yezidi villages (and the refugee camps these days), the places I visited were primarily in the vicinity of Duhok. This part of Iraq, lying on the periphery of the great Near Eastern cultures of the past, is relatively unknown in the archaeological literature and is even less studied from the point of view of the modern, vernacular interpretation of archaeological heritage. Even today, when many archaeologists "fleeing" Syria have opted to continue their excavations in the safety of Iraqi Kurdistan, the region around Duhok still attracts relatively little attention. A notable exception is the recent excavation at Bassetki, hiding the ancient city of Mardaman, by the Duhok-Zakho road (Edwards 2018; Cuneiform Tabletts 2013).

The constant civil wars of the last few decades have taken a heavy toll on some of the historical heritage of Kurdistan, just as they had in the rest of Iraq, but neglect, modernization, the forces of nature and art looting may pose an even more serious threat at the moment. The following description is in no way comprehensive or complete, as this part of Kurdistan has many ancient churches and its mountains hide little known and even less identified ruins. There are also numerous small tells at the foothills, where the mountains meet the plain, many of which now display Yezidi shrines on their tops, making archaeological excavation a sensitive issue. It must also be emphasized that my own field of research lies far from archaeology, consequently my description of these sites is that of an interested specialist of another academic field, couched in the vocabulary of an interested historian of religion unfamiliar with the terminology of archaeology or art history.

¹ Fritz Thyssen Foundation (grant number 2017-00830).

² Prior to my latest trip, I did field research in the Kurdistan Region in 2002-2003, 2004, 2006, 2011-2012 (supported by Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (OTKA), PD 839210, and the Gerda Henkel Foundation, AZ 28_F_10), 2013, 2015 and 2016. My publications on the Yezidis include the books *Yezidis* (London, Saqi, 2005), *Late Antique Motifs in Yezidi Oral Tradition* (Piscataway NJ, Gorgias, 2010), as well as numerous articles and the film "Following the Peacock."

I owe thanks to Noe Falk and Irene Dulz for providing me and other foreigners with information and directions to places of interest around Duhok in their small unpublished guidebook, *Hikes in Kurdistan*. It was from this booklet that I learned about several sites I visited, as they are not mentioned in guidebooks, nor are they well-known among the local population.³

KHINNIS: THE GATE OF THE ASSYRIAN WATER CANAL

Khinnis, also known as Bavian,⁴ is perhaps the best known archaeological monument of the Duhok governorate, with its Assyrian reliefs.⁵ (*Fig. 1.*). The road leading to Khinnis branches off the road leading from Ain Sifni to Lalish, the holy valley of Yezidis. Khinnis stands as a veritable memento to the engineering feast of the Assyrian king, Sennacherib (704-681 BC), who had a ninety-five kilometers long canal system constructed in order to carry the water of the Gomel river from the Kurdish mountains to Nineveh. This formed part of Sennacherib's projects to construct a network of irrigation canals which brought water not only to the royal palace and garden but also to the fields and orchards around Nineveh, thus providing the base for the economic growth of the newly founded capital.⁶ According to the British scholar of the Ancient Near East, Stephanie Dalley, the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon were in fact the royal gardens of Sennacherib's Nineveh and they were watered by the water of the Gomel river (DALLEY 2013: 83-105). To commemorate his achievement, the king ordered huge reliefs to be carved into the rock wall above the Gomel, at the source of the canal, complete with cuneiform inscriptions describing the construction of the canal. (*Fig. 2*.). The sentences devoted to the monument at Khinnis/Bavian state:





Fig. 1.: Rock Wall above the Gomel River at Khinnis

Fig. 2.: Assyrian inscription at Khinnis

At the "mouth" of the canal I caused to be dug into the mountain, [I ma]de six stele[s] (and) I fashioned image(s) of the great god, my lords, upon them. Moreover, I had a royal image of myself expressing humility (lit. "one who strokes the nose") placed before them. I had all of my handiwork that I had undertaken in Nineveh inscribed upon them and I left (them) forever after for the kings, my descendants.⁷

³ I also owe thanks to international relief workers John Kilkenny and Antonia Haegner, who made it possible that I travel to several of these sites, though I had no car of my own.

⁴ Both names refer to nearby settlements.

⁵ For archaeological descriptions of Khinnis see Bachmann 1927 and Jacobsen–Lloyd 1935.

On the extensive canalization project of Nineveh and its environs, see Bonacossi 2017a and 2017b.

For the original text see the website of the Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period Project: http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/rinap/q004028 and http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/rinap/rinap3/rinap32textintroductions/northernandnortheasternassyria/index.html#rinap3no223 (Last accessed 03.20.2019).

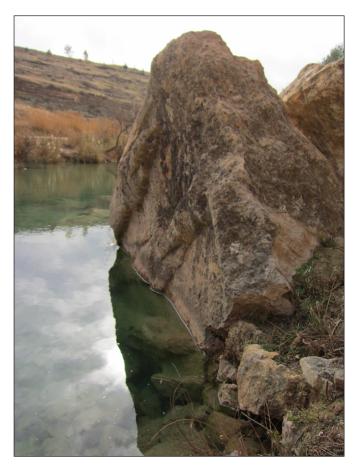


Fig. 3.: The "Gate" of the channel, with carved reliefs, fallen into the river



Fig. 4.: The "Gate" of the channel, with carved relief of a winged bull, fallen into the river

Huge steles were also erected on the bank of the river, acting as the "gate of the canal," with winged bulls and the figures of gods carved into it. Over the centuries these steles collapsed and fell into the water. Now pieces of them lie half submerged in the river or just on the river bank (*Fig. 3-4.*).

On the rock cliff rising just next above the river numerous reliefs can still be discerned. In the center is a monumental relief portraying the king along with Assyrian gods (*Fig. 5-6.*). There are also many other panels with the reliefs of various deities, some

of them surprisingly high on the sheer rock wall. Most of them are badly weathered, sometimes only their niches remain. Parts of the canal, lost elsewhere, can still be clearly seen in the valley. At some places the water runs through tunnels dug into rocks and the original paving of the canal can still be seen – the canal used to be paved all the way to Nineveh originally. According to the guards working at the site, the hills around Khinnis house many other archaeological remains and it would take days to visit all of them. Noe Falk in his guidebook calls attention to a (probably medieval) castle in the hills some five kilometer from Khinnis, about half an hour hike above the village of Sheikhha. Behind the castle the remains of a large settlement can be seen.

It is worth noting, to better understand the complex dynamics of multi-ethnic Kurdistan, that during my first visit to the site, in 2012 January, the guard, who doubled as a guide and took great please in guiding around a foreign visitor, identified the Assyrians who built the canal with the Assyrian Christians (neo-Aramaic speaking Christians) of today's Kurdistan. In reality, the historicity of the "Assyrian" self-appellation of Aramaic-speaking Christians is strongly debatable and its origin can be traced to Western travelers. Nineteenth century travelers and missionaries, fascinated by the recent archaeological discoveries, were intent on identifying the ancient origin of various ethnic groups in the region. They were the first ones to claim that the Nestorian Christians of the Kurdish mountains (today officially known as the followers of the Assyrian Church of the East) were the direct descendants of the ancient Assyrians. Eventually, Nestorian Christians embraced this rather prestigious pedigree. Today not only they, but also other neo-Aramaic speaking Christians (Chaldeans and Syriac Catholics following Rome, and Syriac Orthodox Christians, previously known as Jacobites) claim to be Assyrians. They have all adopted many symbols of the "pagan"

⁸ Coordinates: 36 46' 28.43" N, 43 27' 09.35" E (Falk–Dulz S.A.).



Fig. 5.: Relief carved into the rock wall, showing the king Sennacherib and Assyrian gods, with cells carved by Christian hermits



Fig. 6.: Portion of the main relief showing king Sennacherib

Assyrian past, from winged bulls to the star of Ishtar, somewhat at odds with their Christian identity. Despite the historical difference between the ancient Assyrians and "Assyrian" Christians, the guide was convinced that the canal and reliefs were created by Christians, adding "Christians are clever, more clever than us [i.e. the Kurds]." In reality, Christian activity on the site was limited to caves, some of them artfully carved right into the central reliefs (no doubt to symbolize Christianity's conquest over the pagan deities of the past). Interestingly, another guide I met in 2017 attributed the creation of the caves to Zoroastrians. This no doubt reflects the well-publicized discovery of a number of "Zoroastrian cave-temples" in the past decade or so, when the Kurdish state actively worked at creating a material past through archaeology, connecting Kurds to their alleged Zoroastrian forebears. As Richard Folz quipped in his article on the topic: "the KRG's [Kurdistan Regional Government's] Directorate of Antiquities tends to label any pre-Islamic building they find as a 'Zoroastrian temple'" (Foltz 2017: 98).

Christians and putative Zoroastrians aside, the monuments are in a rather bad condition. Older pictures indicate that the site has deteriorated even in the past hundred years or so. According to one of the guards/guides, Saddam's soldiers used the reliefs for target practice across the valley. However, it is impossible to say if this was really true, or just a rural urban legend about the dark times under Saddam. Given that nothing protects the reliefs carved into limestone against rain and wind, the deterioration may even be natural.¹⁰

Khinnis is probably the only archaeological site in the Duhok governorate which is relatively well-known among Kurds and has attracted local tourists for decades. People recalled visiting the site back under Saddam, before 1991. Despite the attention, little information seems to be available on the true nature of the

⁹ See also the section of the reliefs of Geverke (in Part 2 of the article).

The site is on World Monuments Watch, see the WMW website: https://www.wmf.org/project/khinnis-reliefs (Last accessed 03.20.2019).

site. For example, some believe that Khinnis used to function as a stone quarry, where statues to be erected in Nineveh and other parts of the Assyrian empire were sculpted from rock. They think that the huge reliefs in the water, carved into what used to be the "gate" of the canal, are actually half-finished statues which were left in the water, when for some reason they were no longer needed in their planned destination.

The site has lately become a favorite picnic place, reflecting the growing mobilization of Kurds as cars have become household commodities. On warm weekends there are families around. Most of them, though, pay little attention to the monuments. Some do not even bother to enter the site itself (there is a small, nominal entrance fee), but stay on the other side of the river, playing around in the shallow waters and enjoying their picnic. Litter all over the archaeological site is a sad sign of the growing popularity of the place.

JERWANA - ASSYRIAN AQUEDUCT

The place known as Jerwana (named after a Kurdish village) houses the remains of an Assyrian aqueduct passing over a valley.¹¹ The aqueduct was part of the ninety-five kilometer long water canal which the Assyrian king Sennacherib (704-681 BC) ordered to be built to carry the water of the Gomel river in the Kurdish mountains to Niniveh. This is the oldest aqueduct known to mankind. What a non-archaeologist can see is a huge raised platform paved with stones and ending in rows of stairs on both end. (*Fig.* 7.). Assyrian cuneiform texts are carved into the stones forming the side of the platform. According to the available literature on Jerwana, these talk about how the king had ordered the water channel to be built¹² (*Fig.* 8-9).



Fig. 7.: Stairs

Jerwana is near the highway leading from Duhok to Erbil, five kilometers after the town of Ain Sifni and just next to the Yezidi collective village of Mahad on the other side of road.¹³ It is yet another of the hidden, little-known treasures of the region. There is only a single, very small sign by the highway indicating its existence. A small dirt track leads from the sign to the



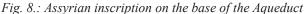




Fig. 9.: Assyrian inscription next to an Arabic inscription

¹¹ For a thorough description of the Jerwana aqueduct, its discovery and archaeological excavation, see Jacobsen-Lloyd 1935.

For the analysis and translation of the inscriptions see Jacobsen–Lloyd 1935: 19-27; Fales–Del Fabbro 2014.

¹³ Coordinates: 36 40' 12.57" N, 43 23' 32.64" E (Falk-Dulz S.A.).



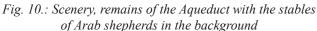




Fig. 11.: Yezidi nishangeh ("sign" or small shrine) with the Aqueduct in the background

ruins about one kilometer away. Unlike Khinnis, few Kurds appear to have heard of Jerwana, and the lack of garbage indicates that it gets few visitors. Photos taken in 2014 show graffiti on some of the stones, but they must have been removed before my visit. 14 The site's obscurity is probably its best protection, as otherwise at the moment nothing else safeguards the remains against human vandalism, art looting (a growing occupation in Iraq) or the depredation of the weather.

In 1932, at the time of its discovery by the archaeologists Jacobsen and Lloyd, a stream cut through the ruins, causing further damage to the structure, especially when it flooded. This stream now runs at a distance, in what appears to be a man-made canal, probably with the intention of preventing further damage to the ruins. In 1932 there was also a Yezidi village here called Jerwan(a) which was built "partly overlapping the stone structure" (JACOBSEN-LLOYD 1935: 1). In their work, the archaeologists remark on how the villagers built some of the stones bearing cuneiform inscription into the walls of their homes or used them as stools to sit in their yards. Furthermore, a few years prior to the excavation, the Yezidi mîr or Prince had also used the Jerwana aqueduct as a quarry for stones to be used in a building project in nearby Aini Sifni (JACOBSEN-LLOYD 1935: 5). Fales and Del Fabbro, who studied the aqueduct in 2012, claim that the village was still visible in an aerial photograph of 1955, and seemed to have grown in size. However, today there is no sign of the village. According to Fales and Del Fabbro "following the intervention by Kurdish archaeological authorities, the village has been evacuated and razed to the ground" (FALES–DEL FABBRO 2014: 70). This claim, however, should be treated with some caution, as the surrounding Yezidi villages were moved by the Iraqi government into the Yezidi collective village of Mahad in the eighties, 15 and the Kurdish government extended its authority over these parts only after the fall of the Saddam regime in 2003. It is likely that the village of Jerwana was either razed at the time of the politically motivated "collectivization" or even earlier, at the instigation of Iraqi, rather than Kurdish, archaeological authorities. In any case, today there is only one (apparently new) farm house next to the site. It may belong to refugees from some other part of Iraq as the children did not understand Kurdish. A few hundred meters from the site there are the tents, some makeshift houses and stables of an extended family of Arab shepherds, who have been tending their flocks there for years (Fig. 10.). Next to the dirt track leading to the site from the highway there are some fields cultivated by Sinjari Yezidi refugees, who fled Sinjar in 2014, living in small huts constructed of cement blocks and mud. These are new constructions, however, and may not prove to be permanent, provided their owners can return to Sinjar. The dirt road itself is said to lead to a Yezidi shrine by the stream, and during my visit to Jerwana cars kept coming and going as a wedding was held next to the shrine. It was

For photos see the website of the Assyrian International News Agency: http://www.aina.org/releases/20140518202142.html (Last accessed 03.20.2019).

¹⁵ On the creation of collective villages see the chapter on Qale Badre (in Pt 2 of the article).

a wedding of Yezidi refugees from the nearby Mam Reshan refugee camp and the site was not chosen for religious reasons, but simply because it was considered a more pleasant spot for weddings than a crowded refugee camp. There is also a small, old-fashioned Yezidi *nishangeh* ("sign" or small shrine) next to the dirt track, erected in the honor of some Yezidi holy being (*Fig. 11*.). It is surrounded by small stones marking tombs. The tombs probably belong to children, as it used to be a Yezidi custom to bury small ones, still living on their mother's milk, in separate cemeteries, usually in a secluded place.

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