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About the Society of Friends

Founded in 1979 to encourage public support and use of the museum, members in the Society participate in many activities including lectures, children's activities, cultural trips and excursions as well as many social events. All Society members receive a subscription to the Museum Newsletter.

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The Genius of Neo-Assyrian Imperialism:
Recent Discoveries at Tell Tayinat in the North Orontes Valley

By Dr. Timothy P. Harrison

Date: May 11th, 2017

Recent studies of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (ca. 911-612 BCE), arguably the world’s first true empire, have begun to emphasize the material dimensions of Neo-Assyrian imperialism, particularly the physical and visual expressions of Neo-Assyrian imperial power, and to explore its articulation in the archaeological record.

The genius of Neo-Assyrian imperial ideology is particularly evident in the way it was expressed through material form. This extended beyond the usual types of monumental remains, like large public buildings and fortification systems, to include large-scale representational art forms such as wall reliefs and sculpture, and craft industries such as ceramic fine ware production. Art historians have begun to emphasize the programmatic nature of Neo-Assyrian imperial art, and the remarkably sophisticated use of the written word to construct composite visual narratives that conveyed carefully crafted ideological messages to their intended audiences. These messages often were nuanced or tailored to very specific audiences, sometimes representing very different constituencies. The result was a complex visual and symbolic landscape that both projected and reinforced Neo-Assyrian imperial ideology, in which the Assyrian king was portrayed as ruler of the known world and imbued with divine authority as the earthly representative of Ashur, patron deity of Assyria.

Ongoing excavations at the archaeological site of Tell Tayinat, located in the North Orontes Valley in southeastern Turkey, have uncovered the remains of a Neo-Assyrian settlement, including an Assyrian Governor’s Residence and—most recently and intriguingly—a temple dating to this period (specifically the Iron III, or late 8th-7th centuries BCE). Ancient historical sources attest to the fact that Tayinat was destroyed in 738 BCE by the Neo-Assyrian empire-builder, Tiglath-pileser III, who then renamed it Kinalia and transformed the site into a provincial capital with a governor and local administration. Tayinat thus offers a rare opportunity to examine the physical manifestations of Neo-Assyrian imperialism.

THE SYRIAN-HITTITE EXPEDITION EXCAVATIONS

Large-scale excavations were first carried out at Tayinat by a team from the University of Chicago over four field seasons between 1935 and 1938 as part of the Syrian-Hittite Expedition. Their excavations focused primarily on the citadel, or upper mound, of the site, in an area they called the West Central Area, and uncovered several large palaces and a small temple dating to the Iron II (ca. 9th-8th centuries BCE), when Tayinat was known as Kunulua, royal city of the Neo-Hittite Kingdom of Patina. This complex of buildings was then renovated in the Iron III period, coinciding with the Neo-Assyrian conquest of the site, and thus preserves remains of their efforts to transform Tayinat into the provincial capital of Kinalia.

One of the more interesting buildings uncovered by the Chicago excavators was found on a separate knoll to the south of the West Central Area. The structure, called Building IX by the Chicago team, proved to be an Assyrian Governor’s Residence. The rooms of Building IX were arranged around two large courtyards paved with baked bricks. The principal room of the building, which would have served as the reception room for the governor’s public functions, measured approximately 8 x 26 m in size, and was paved with a floor made of small pebbles laid on edge in a lime plaster bed. The walls of this room were made of unbaked brick supported by a wood frame, and they appear to have been brightly decorated with blue-painted plaster. A stone threshold and two pivot stones indicate the room was entered through a double-swinging doorway. The room contained a number of intriguing installations, most notably, a rectangular limestone slab, measuring 1.2 x 2.8 m, and equipped with a hole in its center. A second installation consisted of two parallel rows of grooved stones, each approximately 5.3 m in length, embedded in the pebble paving toward the west end of the room. The Building IX complex was also equipped with an extensive network of drainage pipes, part of a remarkably sophisticated system of indoor plumbing.
Neo-Assyrians at Tell Tayinat. These include several Assyrian cuneiform inscriptions, apparently the remains of sculptures or commemorative stelae, a number of clay cuneiform tablets, and a stone cylinder seal. The most informative Neo-Assyrian inscription, however, is a dedication "for the life of Tiglath-pileser, King of Assyria," carved into the gold foil of an ornately decorated copper disk, possibly a votive or a dedicatory foundation deposit, which was found near one of the palatial buildings in the West Central Area.

The features of Building IX clearly mark it as the residence of the Neo-Assyrian governor. To further emphasize its importance, Building IX was constructed on a massive elevated platform, or temenos, and it was approached through a heavily fortified gate (Gateway VII; see Fig. 2) lined with carved sandstone blocks (called orthostats) depicting Assyrian commandos trampling the decapitated bodies of their vanquished foes. Similarly designed and decorated Neo-Assyrian Governor's Residences have been found at other contemporary settlements in the region, including Tell Ahmar (ancient Til Barsip) and Arslan Tash (ancient Hadinu) in Syria. These buildings were all modelled after the great Assyrian royal palaces of Nimrud, Khorsabad and Nineveh (modern Mosul) in northern Iraq.

Several small finds from the Chicago excavations, unfortunately quite fragmentary, and found in poor contexts, also hint at the ideological program operationalized by the
A second set of piers separated the central room from a small back room, the inner sanctuary, or ‘holy of holies’, of the temple. This northern-most room contained an elevated, rectangular platform, or podium. The surface of the podium was paved with clay tiles, and accessed by steps in its two southern corners. The room had also been burned in the intense fire, and contained a wealth of cultic paraphernalia found strewn across the podium and around its base, including gold, bronze and iron implements, libation vessels and ornately decorated ritual objects. The surface debris also contained a series of cuneiform tablets written in Neo-Assyrian script.

Certainly must date to the Neo-Assyrian occupation in the late 8th-7th centuries BCE. However, the distinctive architectural style and design of the building’s original structures suggest that it was constructed together with the adjacent palaces of the West Central Area sometime in the early- to mid-9th century BCE, prior to the arrival of the Neo-Assyrians. Then, sometime in the late 8th or early 7th century BCE, the Assyrians renovated the building and transformed it into a Neo-Assyrian temple with a distinctively Assyrian religious architectural style.

Moreover, when considered together with the nearby temple (Building II) discovered by the Chicago team, the two form a Double Temple complex, or sacred precinct, that closely resembles similar religious complexes at the royal cities of Nimrud and Khorsabad in the Assyrian heartland.

The Assyrian renovations to Building XVI included a ceramic tile pavement that partially obscures the column base embedded in the porch, the inner piers that separate the central room from the cells, and the ceramic tile-surfaced podium and altar that were installed in this inner chamber. A large elevated structure (Platform XV) appears to have been part of this complex, and it is tempting to suggest that this structure, which measured 46 x 87 m, might have served as an elevated platform for a religious monument, perhaps a small ziggurat, as was similarly found associated with the double temple complex at Khorsabad.

Eleven discrete tablets, or texts, were found on the podium in Building XVI. Eight are standard Mesopotamian omen texts, called lqqr îpaš, which typically dealt with the timing of important activities or events in the life of a community (e.g., weddings, building a home, the start of the planting or harvest seasons). The Tayinat lqqr îpaš tablets are displayed in tabular format, with the vertical axis listing the activities, and the horizontal axis the optimal month(s) of the year when they should be carried out.

The largest (28 x 43 cm in size) tablet records an oath by the provincial governor of Kinaita binding him in loyalty to Ashurbanipal, the son and chosen successor of the Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon. The 674-line text closely parallels similar oath tablets that were found in a throne room adjacent to the Double Temple Complex of Nabu at Nimrud (ancient Kalhu) in 1955, and most likely commemorates a major historical event that took place there in 672 BCE (specifically the 18th day of the second month of that year), in which all the subjugated rulers and vassals of the Assyrian Empire swore their collective loyalty to the Neo-Assyrian king.

Most intriguing, however, is the possibility that these oath tablets were deliberately kept in place their oath-takers were expected to visit on a regular basis. The other tablets found with the Tayinat Oath Tablet help to clarify the broader social context of this remarkable collection of cuneiform documents. As first noted by the Assyriologist Jacob Luminier, who deciphered the Tayinat tablets, two of the omen texts preserve markings that suggest they belonged to a class of amulet-shaped tablets intended primarily as votives, and were in fact meant for display, specifically as part of annual covenant renewal ceremonies. To better appreciate the sacramental role of...
The Tayinat Oath Tablet, it is important to note one of its most distinguishing features: the Seal of Ashur. When applied to a tablet, the Seal of Ashur transformed it into a 'Tablet of Destiny', ratifying the document as a direct communication of Ashur’s divine will as the paramount god of the Assyrians, and thus not to be altered at risk of death and total annihilation. There is reason to believe these ceremonies took place during the annual new year’s (akītu) festival. As we have seen, the Nimrud oath tablets were found in a throne room in the Nabu Temple. This complex of rooms was known as the bit akītu, where the annual akītu ceremony of Nabu and his partner Taṣmetu was performed. A document known as the Covenant of Ashur offers further insight into this oath-taking ceremony. The oath tablet was brought before the king and read aloud while a number of rituals were performed, including the burning of incense and oils, essentially activating the oath in the process. The presence of oil lamps, libation vessels, an incense box and a sacrificial altar on the podium in the inner sanctum of Building XVI (see Fig. 6) furnishes remarkable corroborating detail of the rituals described in this document, while providing a vivid image of the religious ceremonies that once took place there.

CONCLUSION

The ceremonies and rituals performed within the Tayinat sacred precinct help to illuminate the broader imperial project the Neo-Assyrians deployed at Tayinat, while also revealing their sophisticated use of the material form to communicate this political message. The Tayinat Double Temple complex, in effect, served as a stage for enacting the rituals and theatre of divine sanction within the local community. Together with the impressive public buildings and redesigned Neo-Hittite royal citadel, the Tayinat sacred precinct offers an insightful glimpse into the imperial ambitions of Tiglath-pileser III and his successors. The transformed citadel stood as a powerful visual symbol that both manifested and reinforced the ideology of the Assyrian imperial program, elevating the king as supreme world ruler, imbued with divinely sanctioned authority, and responsible for maintaining order throughout the imperial realm.

The Jewels of Saida: New Discoveries at Khan Sacy and St Nicolas Church

By Dr. André G. Sacy

Written by Dominique Sadi

Dr. Sacy opened his talk by stating that Saida is a passion he wants to share. He is particularly interested in the Old City, which has remained as it was for a very long time. A 1934 photograph shows the Old City lying within the surrounding walls leading from the Land Castle to the Sea Castle. Most houses are by the sea. By 1936 the castles were linked by a bridge. Changes over the centuries can be traced in the form of old ruins and walls along the sea. Dr. Sacy traced the map anticlockwise starting with the Sea Castle. Originally everything was concentrated around the castle and everything else was ignored. It was built at different periods (1254), then St Louis (IX) rebuilt it and lived in it until he left when his mother died. After the Crusades, the little mosque as well as a series of squares were added and later cleaned up to what appears today.

The best map by Gaillardot/Renan (1864) is still in existence and shows the most details. The Muslim cemetery is on there and outside the walls, Khan Al Franj and the big Mosque. The town as shown on the map dates mostly from the Crusades but the old city is a very small part of today Saida, which has spread into a large city.