

Rock reliefs (below) that celebrated the construction of a canal during the Neo-Assyrian Empire (883–609 B.C.) were recently excavated at the site of Faïda in Iraqi Kurdistan. A wall relief (right) from the palace of Sargon II (r. 721–705 B.C.) at Khorsabad depicts the king (far right) and his son and successor, Sennacherib (r. 704–681 B.C.).



# THE KING'S CANAL

**Rock reliefs in Iraqi Kurdistan show how Assyrian farmers toiled under the royal gaze**

by DANIEL WEISS

**I**N ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA, irrigation was the key to civilization. Rivers such as the Tigris and Euphrates carried a plentiful flow of water, fed by snowmelt from the mountains of Anatolia to the north. However, unlike the Nile in Egypt, which flooded on a regular annual schedule that perfectly accommodated the

growing seasons, Mesopotamian rivers did so unpredictably and violently. To protect against the havoc caused by untamed flooding and to provide a steady supply of water to cultivate the land, Mesopotamian kings saw the construction of irrigation systems as among their chief responsibilities.

The pride rulers took in these engineering feats is made



clear by a number of celebratory rock reliefs that have been discovered near irrigation projects dating to the Neo-Assyrian Empire (883–609 B.C.). At the site of Khinis, for example, where the Gomel River emerges from a narrow gorge at the foot of the Zagros Mountains, the king Sennacherib (r. 704–681 B.C.) built a dam that diverted its waters into a canal that fed into a series of waterways snaking some 60 miles in all across the plains to the walls of his new capital at Nineveh. This canal was the crown jewel in an extensive regional irrigation network the king built. To commemorate his exploits, Sennacherib commissioned monumental reliefs, along with a lengthy cuneiform inscription, carved into a cliff rising above the canal head at Khinis. In the inscription, he claims that when he founded his new capital, its unwatered fields were “woven over with spider webs” and its people “did not know artificial irrigation, but had their eyes turned for rain (and

showers from the sky.” Thanks to his new canal network, Sennacherib writes, opulent gardens bloomed at Nineveh, and the countryside grew abundant with crops.

Newly excavated Neo-Assyrian rock reliefs at the site of Faida, some 25 miles west of Khinis, also appear to enshrine the construction of a canal—though they do so in a way that archaeologists have never seen before. While no inscriptions have been found with the Faida reliefs, archaeologists believe they nevertheless conveyed a clear message to an audience that likely would not have been able to read inscriptions, even if they did exist. These were the local farmers who frequented the canal to draw water for their crops. And, unlike other known Neo-Assyrian reliefs associated with waterworks, which are confined to a single location, those at Faida stretch over at least a mile of the canal’s length, blanketing the countryside. “We don’t know anything that is really comparable with it,” says Daniele



Morandi Bonacossi, an archaeologist at the University of Udine and codirector of the team working at the site. The reliefs offer insight into how Neo-Assyrian kings kept their subjects in line by trumpeting their accomplishments and boasting of their close ties to the deities who ruled over them all.

UNCOVERING THE FAIDA reliefs was a long time coming. The site is located in Iraqi Kurdistan, which was off-limits to archaeologists for much of the twentieth century because of strife between its people and the government in Baghdad. During a brief visit to Faida in the early 1970s, British archaeologist Julian Reade spotted three sections of rock-cut reliefs poking out of soil that had washed down from nearby mountains, filling the canal. In 2012, Morandi Bonacossi led a survey of the waterway's four-mile length and identified six more relief sections cropping up from the ground. Only a foot or so at the top of the carvings was visible, revealing the tips of crowns that Morandi Bonacossi thought likely belonged to Assyrian deities. When ISIS advanced into the area, the archaeologists had to abandon their work. By late 2019, however, it was safe for Morandi Bonacossi to return with the Kurdish-Italian Faida Archaeological Project, along with his codirector, Hasan Ahmed Qasim of the Duhok Directorate of Antiquities.

In the process of excavating the previously known relief sections, the team discovered one more, for a total of 10. Each section measures about six feet high and 15 feet wide. As the archaeologists removed the soil from the carvings, they found that each panel depicted an identical scene in which statues of seven of the most important Assyrian deities are carried on the backs of animals—some real, some fantastical—while an Assyrian king stands at either end of the procession. The Assyrians saw these deities as immense in both physical form and in the power they wielded

over humanity. Like humans, they were subject to emotions and capable by turns of compassion and cruelty. They were also amenable to prayers and hymns, but, as depicted in the Faida reliefs, the king shared a much more direct connection to them than did anyone else.

First in the reliefs' divine parade is Ashur, the chief Assyrian god. He was originally the local god of his namesake city, an early Assyrian capital, but grew in stature as the empire expanded. Ashur was considered the true ruler of Assyria, and the king his earthly representative. At the behest of the god, Neo-Assyrian kings led annual military campaigns to extend his—and their—territory, with some of their greatest gains occurring under Sennacherib and his father and predecessor, Sargon II (r. 721–705 B.C.). At the empire's height, the Assyrians controlled lands from western Iran to the Mediterranean and from Anatolia to Egypt. The kings moved huge numbers of people from one end of the empire to the other—in part to neutralize potential rebellions, and in part to populate new cities and provide farm labor in rural areas. Once they belonged to the empire, these new residents were expected to worship Ashur and the rest of the Assyrian pantheon.

In the carvings, Ashur stands far taller than the rest of the deities atop a bull and a *muṣḫuššu*, a mythical Mesopotamian dragon that has the body of a snake, the front legs of a lion, and the rear feet of an eagle. Following Ashur is his wife, Mullissu, who sits on a decorated throne borne by a lion. Next in line is Sin, the moon god, supported by a horned lion. Then, propped up on a *muṣḫuššu* is a deity Morandi Bonacossi believes to be the god of wisdom, Nabu, who gave people the gift of writing. After Nabu is the sun god, Shamash, who was also the god of justice—no earthly doings escape the notice of the sun. Shamash stands atop a horse; he was associated with horses because the sun disc was thought to be transported across the sky in a horse-drawn chariot. The weather god, Adad, who could bring gentle



Monumental reliefs that include a lengthy cuneiform inscription were carved on a cliff at the site of Khinis, 25 miles east of Faida, to commemorate a canal built there during the reign of Sennacherib.

rains or calamitous storms depending on his mood, is next, brandishing lightning bolts in his right hand and standing on a horned lion and a bull. Bulls were associated with the weather god because the Assyrians believed thunder was the sound of their stampeding hooves. Last among the deities is Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, wearing a star-topped crown and conveyed by a lion.

Morandi Bonacossi has identified the figure standing at each end of the procession as an Assyrian king, based on the cone-shaped tip of his tiara, the mace he holds in his left hand, and a hand-to-nose gesture used by royals to demonstrate respect to the gods. Although scholars have long believed that the Faida canal must have been part of Sennacherib's regional irrigation network, Morandi Bonacossi argues, in part based on stylistic features of the reliefs, that it was actually built by Sargon II. In the upcoming field season, he hopes to unearth further evidence to bolster his case. "Maybe we will find an inscription naming the king who built the canal and carved the reliefs," he says.

**T**HE CANAL AND RELIEF PANELS at Faida were all sculpted out of naturally occurring bedrock and ran along the side of a low hill. The plain below the canal is thought to have been home to a number of Neo-Assyrian villages inhabited largely by herders who tended sheep and goats and farmers who grew olives and grapes in the hills and wheat and barley on the plains. These farmers depended on the steady supply of water provided by the Faida canal and other irrigation projects in the area. Their crops were essential to feeding the appetites of residents of the nearby Assyrian capitals at Khorsabad, which was founded by Sargon II, and Nineveh. "These hydraulic systems allowed the Assyrian imperial administration to significantly increase the agricultural productivity of the area," says Morandi Bonacossi, "and it became a sort of granary for Assyria." The goal of the Faida reliefs, he points out, was to play up the king's privileged relationship to the gods, a relationship that allowed him to carry out such important irrigation projects. "The reliefs are telling the local people to remember that all this was made possible by the king," Morandi Bonacossi says, "and that he is the one to whom they owe the fertility of their land."

Jason Ur, a Harvard University landscape archaeologist who has studied Neo-Assyrian irrigation systems and rock monuments in the area, notes that most Neo-Assyrian reliefs were located in palaces or temples, which would have been accessible only to the elite, or at the edge of the empire, placed there as a warning to neighboring kingdoms. The Faida reliefs, by contrast, would have been seen by local farmers every time they came to the canal to open the sluice gates and water their



**The Faida reliefs depict (left to right) the Assyrian moon god, Sin, standing on a horned lion; Mullissu, wife of the chief Assyrian god, Ashur, sitting on a decorated throne carried by a lion; Ashur, borne by a bull and a Mesopotamian dragon called a *mušhuššu*; and an Assyrian king thought to be Sargon II.**

fields. "This would have been a really powerful reminder to the 99 percent that the kings were there, they were divinely chosen, and they were powerful," says Ur. Given that the reliefs unearthed at Faida thus far extend over more than a mile of the canal's length, and that all 10 of them depict exactly the same tableau, Ur suggests they were intended to ensure that people living or farming at different points along the canal all received the same message: "You're living in Assyria and you're under the rule of the king of Assyria, who is the representative on Earth of these gods, and most importantly, of Ashur."

Many of these local residents, Ur says, may have been among those forcibly moved to the Assyrian heartland after having been conquered—a population that the king might have seen as in particular need of indoctrination into the Assyrian worldview. "It would have been important to convey these sorts of non-textual messages to people who may not have felt a cultural or ethnic connection to the land they found themselves in," says Ur. "Maybe they identified themselves as Israelites or Iranians or people from Anatolia." The origins of the population in the immediate vicinity of the canal are unknown, but at a site called Tell Gomel, some 30 miles to the southeast, Morandi Bonacossi has excavated a number of cremation burials—a non-Assyrian practice—interred with typical Neo-Assyrian grave goods. "This might suggest the presence of foreigners," he says, "of deportees who were captured during Assyrian military campaigns and resettled in Assyria." Once ensconced in their new homes, they were no doubt regularly informed that their well-being was now in the hands of Ashur, who had started out as the god of a single city and now presided, along with his able representative, the Assyrian king, over the largest empire the world had ever seen. ■

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