

Archeologists unearth extraordinary human sculpture in Turkey

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A beautiful and colossal human sculpture is one of the latest cultural treasures unearthed by an international team at the Tayinat Archaeological Project (TAP) excavation site in southeastern Turkey. A large semi-circular column base, ornately decorated on one side, was also discovered. Both pieces are from a monumental gate complex that provided access to the upper citadel of Kunulua, capital of the Neo-Hittite Kingdom of Patina (ca. 1000-738 BC).

"These newly discovered Tayinat sculptures are the product of a vibrant local Neo-Hittite sculptural tradition," said Professor Tim Harrison, the Tayinat Project director and professor of Near Eastern Archaeology in the University of Toronto's Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations. "They provide a vivid glimpse into the innovative character and sophistication of the Iron Age cultures that emerged in the [eastern Mediterranean](#) following the collapse of the great imperial powers of the [Bronze Age](#) at the end of the second millennium BC."

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The second sculpture is a large semi-circular column base, approximately one metre in height and 90 centimetres in diameter, lying on its side next to the human figure. A winged bull is carved on the front of the column and it is flanked by a sphinx on its left. The right side of the column is flat and undecorated, an indication that it originally stood against a wall.

"The two pieces appear to have been ritually buried in the paved stone surface of the central passageway through the Tayinat gate complex," said Harrison. The complex would have provided a monumental ceremonial approach to the upper citadel of the royal city. Tayinat, a large low-lying mound, is located 35 kilometres east of Antakya (ancient Antioch) along the Antakya-Aleppo road.

The presence of colossal human statues, often astride lions or sphinxes, 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 ninth and eighth centuries BC, 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 region in 738 BC, when the area was paved over and converted into the central courtyard of an Assyrian sacred precinct. These smashed and deposited monumental sculptures also include a magnificently carved lion that was discovered last year and Hieroglyphic Luwian-inscribed stela (stone slabs or pillars used for commemoratives purposes). Together these finds hint of an earlier Neo-Hittite complex that might have once faced the gateway approach.

Scholars have long speculated that the reference to Calno, identified as one of the "kingdoms of the idols" in Isaiah's oracle against Assyria (Isaiah 10:9-10), alludes to the Assyrian 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, subsequently memorialized in Isaiah's oracle.

Provided by University of Toronto

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