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Public Space in Nature: the Case of Neo-Assyrian Rock Reliefs

1. Introduction

What immediately comes to mind when considering “public space” are market-places or boulevards in city centres.¹ Thus the notion of “public space” is often associated with specific areas in settlements, and in archaeology this is especially the case, perhaps because most archaeological activities until now were and still are focused on ancient cities and villages. In contrast, this paper tries to investigate “public space” by studying monuments which are located in open nature, not inside settlements.

In the ancient Near East rock reliefs are known from the Akkadian to the Sasanian period. I will focus on the Neo-Assyrian rock reliefs because they represent an iconographically homogeneous group. Neo-Assyrian rock reliefs² were found in the mountains which bound Mesopotamia in the northwest, north and east. Today they are located in Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq and Iran. 49 Neo-Assyrian rock reliefs are known. They were found in groups or as single monuments. Fourteen different locations³ (Fig. 1) containing one or more monuments have been distinguished. Nineteen inscriptions are associated with the reliefs.⁴

The recording of these monuments started in the mid-nineteenth century. The first articles were published by A. H. Layard about Maltai⁵ and Bavian⁶, by

¹ This paper was read at the International Seminar Berlin-Copenhagen in 1999, “The Evolution and Structure of Public Space and Ideology in the Ancient Near East”. Thanks to Prof. Dr. H. Kühne for critical discussions and Dr. A. Green for tuning up my English.

² F.J. Kreppner (1996).

³ Mila Mergi, Cudi Dag I-VIII, Tigris Tunnel I-III, Nahr al-Kalb I-VI, Shikaf-i Gulgul, Kenk Bogazi, Chinnnes/Bavian I-XIV, Faida I-III, Shiru Malikta, Maltai I-IV, Egil, Ferhatli, Karabur I-IV and Tang-i Var.

⁴ Tigris-Tunnel 1-5, Kenk Bogazi, Mala Mergi, Cudi Dag 1-6, Chinnnes/Bavian 1-3, Nahr al-Kalb, Shikaf-i Gulgul, Tang-i Var.

⁵ A. H. Layard 1849: 230.

⁶ A. H. Layard 1953: 207-214.

Were rock reliefs placed in “public space” or did the carving of a rock relief create a “public space”?

The most important criteria for “public space” are visibility and accessibility. Two different aspects should be discussed by which these specific locations might have restricted the “public space”:

Firstly, buildings²¹, fences or even guards could have protected rock reliefs. If this was the case, they were accessible for selected people but not by the public at large. As far as I know, there is no archaeological and philological information for the existence of buildings, fences or guards in combination with Neo-Assyrian rock reliefs.

Secondly, there may have been restrictions from any natural conditions like inaccessibility or great distances from settlements. A location which is easily accessible and visible to many people is more “public” than a place which is separated from roads and settlements by great distances or inaccessibility by water or steep mountains.

If one considers the entire group of Assyrian rock reliefs, different intentions for their location might be distinguished.

2. Rock Reliefs carved during military campaigns²²

Mila Mergi²³ is situated in northern Iraq on the northern flank of a mountain range, which bounds the valley of the Habur to the south. In Neo-Assyrian times this mountain range was the borderline to Ulluba. A path crosses the ridge and therefore it had strategic relevance. The inscription of the rock relief refers to a successful military campaign against Ulluba. A battle on a mountain path is mentioned, which has to be identified with the path at Mila Mergi. This battle was the reason for carving the relief at that special place. The rock relief, interpreted as a victory monument, should have had the effect of a signal or announcement to the users of the path. But this is not the case. The rock relief is not located close to the road visibly, and is not easily reachable. The placement at a distant point half way up the hill and the rather small dimensions, of 1.30 × 0.88 m, show that the effect of an announcement was not intended. More important must have been the orientation towards the valley of the Habur river with a wide overview over Ulluba.

The Cudi Dag²⁴ mountain range is situated in Turkey on the eastern riverside of the Tigris near Cizre. In Neo-Assyrian times a trade road existed along the Tigris connecting Assyria with Anatolia. The inscription reports the subjection

²¹ The Hittite rock reliefs of Yazilikaya were enclosed by temple buildings.

²² Mila Mergi, Cudi Dag I–VIII, Nahr al-Kalb I–VI, Schikaf-i Gulgul, Kenk Bogazi, Ferhatli, Tang-i Var, Tigris Tunnel I–III.

²³ J. N. Postgate 1973: 47–59.

²⁴ L. W. King 1913: 66–94, H. Erkanal 1987: 111–118.

of seven 'eagle nest'-like rebellious villages on a Mount Nipur, which has to be identified with the Cudi Dag itself. Thus the reliefs were carved in consequence of the military activity on the Cudi Dag. The reliefs are placed at different more-or-less hidden locations, so that even today it remains uncertain what the total ensemble of reliefs looked like.²⁵ The effect of an announcement must be excluded because of the inconspicuous positions. More important was the location at the place where the relevant battle took place.

Shikaft-i Gulgul²⁶ is situated 30 km southwest of Ilam in western Luristan. It is not associated either with modern or ancient transport routes. The reason for carving the relief is not preserved in the inscription, but the location far away from Assyria indicates that it was made during a military campaign. Due to the state of publication, no special features of the environment are known to be the reason for the specific location of the relief.

Kenk Bogazi²⁷ is located 60 km northeast of Gaziantep on the western bank of the Euphrates. There is a ford down at the river. However, it could not have been the intention to attract attention from users of the ford. The small dimensions of the relief reveal that it was inconspicuous. The inscription describes the capture of Til Barsib and the siege of the Mount Shittamrat on which the fleeing king Ahuni of Bit Adini barricaded himself. An identification of Mount Shittamrat with a specific mountain is not possible, but a localisation within the region is very probable. The reasons for cutting the relief at that place have to be seen in the geographic proximity to the mentioned military events combined with the orientation towards the Euphrates valley and the ford.

Ferhatli²⁸ is situated in Turkey 20 km northeast of Kozan in the foothills of the Cilician Taurus. No inscription and no Neo-Assyrian archaeological artefacts were recognised in the surrounding area. A criterion for the location seems to be the overview across the plain down to the Mediterranean Sea. Less important must have been the accessibility and the visibility for people. In contrast, the relief is placed on the top of the mountain, far away from any road from which it could have been seen. The existence of a Roman temenos wall indicates a cultic significance in post-Assyrian times.

Tang-i Var²⁹ is located in Iran about 85 km in the northwest of Kermanshah, close to the modern village of Tang-i Var. It is cut 40 m over the ground into a perpendicularly ascending cliff of the Kuh-i Zinaneh in the Tang-i Var pass. The difficulties described by photographing the inscription indicate that it was not well visible for people. The orientation towards the pass must have been the

²⁵ A correlation of the reliefs L.W. King (1913) I-VI and H. Erkanal (1987) 1-6 causes problems.

²⁶ A. K. Grayson - L. D. Levine 1975: 29-38.

²⁷ O. A. Tasyürek 1979: 47-53.

²⁸ O. A. Tasyürek 1975: 169-172.

²⁹ G. Frame 1999: 31-57.

main reason for carving the relief at this place. The event that was the occasion for the creation of the relief is mentioned in the inscription. It was a Campaign to the land Caralla wich is located in that region.

3. Rock Reliefs associated with the canal system of Sennacherib³⁰

The Khinnes/Bavian I-XIV rock reliefs³¹ are situated in Iraq 60 km northeast of Mosul close to the village Khinnes where the river Gomel flows through a gorge. According to the inscriptions the monuments were created at the head of a canal, which supplied Nineveh with water. Archaeological work³² acknowledged the existence of this structure. The topography is favourable for the head of the canal, in which it was possible to feed the river water of the Gomel into the irrigation system. The position of the monuments in the steep rock directly over the weir is thus more related to the head of the canal than to the provision of a view of the reliefs to visitors.

The monuments Faída³³ I-III are located in Iraq about 50 km north of Mosul at a canal, which is part of the irrigation system of Sennacherib. The placement of the reliefs I and II is clearly associated with an overflow installation and relief III refers to the canal itself.

Shiru Malikta³⁴ is situated in Iraq about 45 km north of Mosul. It was carved into the rock above an installation of the northern irrigation system of Sennacherib. The location was selected in such a way that the relief had an view over the plain.

The rock reliefs of Maltai³⁵ I-IV are located in Iraq 70 km north of Mosul. The monuments were placed high over the valley into the face of the steeply rising mountain. Reaching the reliefs is thus very difficult. Given their small dimensions, they are hardly visible from the valley and thus possess no signaling function. Decisive for the selection of the place must have been the view down the valley to the Tigris. J. Reade³⁶ assumes a connection between the monuments and the source Ain Gasara and supposes a canal head from which the water was led south to Shiru Malikta.

³⁰ Chinnnes/Bavian I-XIV, Faída I-III, Shiru Malikta and possibly Maltai I-IV; J. Reade 1978: 47-72, 157-180; A. M. Bagg 2000: 207-224.

³¹ W. Bachmann 1927: 1-22.

³² T. Jacobsen - S. Lloyd 1935: 44-49; R. M. Boehmer 1997: 248; A. M. Bagg 2000: 212-224.

³³ J. Reade 1978: 159-162; R. M. Boehmer 1997: 248-249.

³⁴ J. Reade 1978: 164-166.

³⁵ R. M. Boehmer 1975: 42-84.

³⁶ J. Reade 1978: 165-166.

4. Exceptions: Rock Reliefs on which the king is not represented and inscriptions do not exist³⁷

Egil³⁸ is situated in Turkey about 30 km north of Diyarbakir. The monument is carved into the rock underneath an Urartian castle. This area was disputed area between Urartu and Assyria. An inscription is not preserved. A remarkable feature of the location is the view over the Tigris valley.

The monuments Karabur³⁹ I-IV are located in Turkey about 25 km southeast of Antakya. The choice of the location has to be explained by the presence of strange rock peaks in the plain. The rock reliefs are not visible for far and have no signaling effect. They relate to the topography and the natural peculiarities of the place.

5. Comparison of a very visible and accessible and a very poorly visible and inaccessible ensemble of rock reliefs

Military activity and water seem to be the decisive criteria for carving rock reliefs. Therefore the Tigris Tunnel represents a speciality because it clearly meets both criteria. In the following investigation I will focus on the most relevant aspects of “public space”, visibility and accessibility, by concentrating on two extremes: an ensemble of very visible and accessible Neo-Assyrian rock reliefs at Nahr al-Kalb, and the very poorly visible and inaccessible rock reliefs at the Tigris Tunnel.⁴⁰ I have selected these two extremes in order to discuss how public or not public the space was in which such a monument was placed. These examples are well published with regard to discussion of the environment, the inscriptions and the representations.

Nahr al-Kalb⁴¹:

Nahr al-Kalb is a river in Lebanon, which carries water from the mountains into the Mediterranean Sea. At its mouth, about 12 km north of Beirut (Fig. 1), the foot-hills reach the coast. The road had to cross the river and to pass the rocks (Fig. 2). Hence the Nahr al-Kalb is a narrow passage for the very important north-south traffic along the coast. It is the main route to Egypt. Thus this place has great strategic importance. The rock reliefs are located south of the river above the ancient road which ascends in serpentines. As can be seen on the hundred-year old photograph (Fig. 3), in addition to this Egyptian and Assyrian

³⁷ Egil and Karabur I-IV.

³⁸ M. Wäfler 1976: 290-305.

³⁹ O. A. Tasyürek 1975: 172-180.

⁴⁰ The reliefs at Nahr al-Kalb and the Tigris Tunnel were carved during military campaigns.

⁴¹ F. H. Weissbach 1922; B. Hrouda 1977: 290-291.

road, there are also a Roman road (at c), a modern street and a railway at the lower level. Today, a tunnel of a coast-motorway leads through the rocks (Fig. 4). On this site, altogether nine reliefs and several inscriptions from the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Arabs and French were found. The latest inscription dates to 1946 and celebrates the departure of French troops. Three Egyptian reliefs (Nos. 1, 6 and 8 on Fig. 2) derive from the time of Ramses II in the 13th century BC. They already existed when the Assyrian monuments were added. On Fig. 2 the Neo-Assyrian rock reliefs are marked by circles (Nos. 2-5, 7, 9). As can be seen from Figs. 2 and 5, the choice for the location of the Assyrian rock reliefs was most likely influenced by the fact that at this place Egyptian reliefs already existed. Six Neo-Assyrian rock reliefs are found directly above the ancient road, so that any traveller must have seen them. They were well accessible and visible and, by that token, “public”. The monuments above the road are constructed in a such way that they are oriented towards the north, the west and the south.

One of the Assyrian rock reliefs (Fig. 2: No. 9) bears an inscription of 42 fragmentary lines, which are written across the figure and broken away on the left. The text starts with an invocation to the gods, followed by the mention of King Esarhaddon with his titles and filiation. After this, the campaign against Egypt is described, in which this country was conquered and Esarhaddon was crowned in Memphis. People and booty were brought to Assyria. This campaign is dated in the tenth year of Esarhaddon (671 BC). It is very probable, that this relief was carved during the campaign. The date of the construction of the five reliefs without inscription is not known. Eight campaigns into the region of Nahr al-Kalb under different Neo-Assyrian kings are mentioned in the annals. But it is even possible that Esarhaddon constructed more than one relief.

The quality of the pictorial representations has suffered from wind and rain (Figs. 5, 6). All six rock reliefs show the king dressed in his robe, wearing a tiara and holding a mace. His right hand is raised for prayer (*appa labanu*). In front of his head are symbols of the gods (Fig. 6). It is believed that the reason for constructing the Neo-Assyrian rock reliefs at this very special place can be found in the strategic meaning of the location on the one hand, and in the existence of the older Egyptian monuments on the other. The Egyptian monuments were constructed during Egyptian campaigns into Asia. The Assyrian monuments were cut into the rock next to the Egyptian ones in order to show the predominance of the Assyrian king at this place – the main road from the Near East to Egypt. The inscription tells the visitor that the Assyrian king Esarhaddon conquered Egypt.

This example is given to show an ensemble of “public” Assyrian rock reliefs, which are placed very visibly directly above a highly frequented road. But were these reliefs constructed just to show the travellers on the road the power of the Assyrian king? The second example will illustrate that there might be quite different aspects.

Tigris Tunnel⁴²:

The rock reliefs are located in modern Turkey, about 80 km northeast of Diyarbakir (Fig. 1), close to the village Lice. In the north, a mountain range of the Taurus, running in an east-west direction, forms a barrier for north-south traffic. Not far from the Tigris Tunnel, a modern road connects Lice with Bingöl. It leads to a pass, which allows the crossing of this mountain-range. M. Salvini⁴³ considers it to be the Tibuni pass, which is mentioned in the annals as used by Shalmaneser III on his way to Urartu after his visit to the source of the Tigris river. The Assyrians believed the Tigris Tunnel to be the source of the Tigris, because a tremendous flow of water comes out of the rock. However, this point is not the real source, but the end of a natural tunnel of 1000–1200 m through which a tributary of the Tigris, the – Zebene-suyu, flows. At this location three rock reliefs and five inscriptions have been found.⁴⁴ They are combined into two groups. The first is located at the exit of the tunnel, the second at a cave on a higher level in the rocks (Fig. 7). Two reliefs and three inscriptions are cut into the rock on the left side at the exit of the Tigris Tunnel. They could not be reached by dry feet (Fig. 8). First, there is a relief and one inscription (No. I on Fig. 9) of Tiglath-Pileser I. Inside the tunnel follows a relief and an inscription (No. II on Fig. 9) of Shalmaneser III. Further inside a second inscription (No. III on Fig. 9) of Shalmaneser is found divided by a rock ledge. The second group, including one relief and two inscriptions (Nos. IV, V on Fig. 10) of Shalmaneser III is located at the entrance of the upper cave.

The rock reliefs show the king dressed in his robe, wearing a tiara on his head and holding a mace in his left hand. The right hand is raised to prayer (*ubana tarasu*) (Figs. 11, 12).

The inscription of Tiglath-Pileser I starts with an invocation to the gods. Then the king's name, his titles, filiation, conquered regions and the details of his third campaign to Nairi are mentioned.

All inscriptions of Shalmaneser III start in the same way with invocations to the gods, followed by reference to the king, his titles, filiation and conquered regions. In inscriptions III and V follows a description of the third Nairi campaign. Inscriptions II and IV describe campaigns of the ninth and fourteenth years. Inscriptions III and V mention at the end the construction of the rock relief. The inscriptions below and above are generally very similar, but differ in some details.

In the Black Obelisk inscription the seventh and the fifteenth year are given as dates for the construction of reliefs at the source of the Tigris. The passage for the seventh year says⁴⁵: "... I advanced to the source of the Tigris, where the

⁴² C. F. Lehmann-Haupt 1910: 431–462; E. P. Rossner 1987: 71–85; A. M. Bagg 2000: 112–116.

⁴³ M. Salvini 1995: 49.

⁴⁴ E. Michel 1964: 146–157; E. Unger 1920: 54–60.

⁴⁵ D. D. Luckenbill 1926: 203.

waters gush forth. The weapon of Assur I washed therein, I offered sacrifices to my gods, I spread a gladsome banquet. I fashioned a heroic image of my royal self. The glory of Assur, my lord, every one of my deeds of bravery, which I performed in (different) lands, I wrote thereon, and set it up there.”

This text makes clear that there is a supernatural, religious (metaphysical) reason for constructing the rock relief. It is a report of the deeds, perhaps a kind of business report for the gods. This is given in combination with a ceremony which is mentioned in the Black Obelisk inscription and shown on the bronze work of the Gates of Balawat (Fig. 13). Two friezes demonstrate the ceremony at the Tigris Tunnel and represent the real topography of the two levels: the Tigris Tunnel and the upper cave. In the lower frieze a procession leads to the exit of the tunnel, where someone is shown cutting the relief into the rock. In the tunnel three men are standing in the water holding torches to light up the darkness inside the tunnel. In the upper frieze a sacrifice is shown. It is a bull which is killed in front of the upper cave while the relief seems to be still under construction. The inscription on the bronze relief says: “... I entered the sources of the river, I offered sacrifices to the gods, my royal image I set up.”⁴⁶

The selection of this place for rock reliefs far away from any settlements has to be considered in the religious, magic and spiritual meaning of the source of the Tigris, which represents the essential resource for life and wealth in Assyria. Hence the Assyrian king visited this location to give a report of his deeds to the gods and to offer sacrifices. The reliefs are oriented to the source. They are almost inaccessible and invisible for humans and must therefore be considered as not sited in “public space”.

6. Conclusions

The fact that the creation of rock reliefs was mentioned in the annals and represented on the Bronze Gate of Balawat shows the relevance of these monuments. But as can be seen by the choice of location and orientation the rock reliefs were not produced to impress human beings. On the contrary, placing a relief on a rock in nature far away from any settlement implies a change in the original meaning of this piece of nature and, in addition, an act of taking possession of it. Because, from this moment on, the king and the gods are omnipresent to endow this place with magic and spiritual effects.

There is also an aspect of time. An invisible and inaccessible rock relief was perhaps quite “public” during an inauguration ceremony as shown on the Bronze Gate of Balawat or during processions which were conducted for special reasons, whereas it was “not public” during the rest of the year or some years later.

⁴⁶ D. D. Luckenbill 1926: 226.

Interpreting the rock reliefs the conception of the Neo-Assyrian kingdom has to be considered. The king was the intermediary between the gods and the human beings.⁴⁷ By his deeds he had to enlarge the “order” contrary to the “chaos”. According to the rock reliefs this was done by military campaigns, battles or constructing the irrigation system for Nineveh. The interaction of the king and the gods was expressed in the inscriptions and the representations. The inscriptions usually start with an invocation to the gods followed by a list of deeds and end with a curse. The representations depict the king⁴⁸ in the gesture of prayer in front of the gods which are represented as symbols or, in some cases, as anthropomorphous beings standing on animals.⁴⁹ The inscriptions and the representations demonstrate that the king addresses the gods.

Thus, it can be concluded that religious, magical and spiritual effects were intended for the place, the street, the pass, the ford, the plain, the source, the battlefield or the installation of the canal system. I see this as the main intention of a rock relief – and not the effect of signaling for human beings by visibility and accessibility.

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⁴⁷ Magen 1986: 9–19.

⁴⁸ The king is not represented at Egil, Karabur I–IV, Cudi Dag Sah 1.

⁴⁹ Chinnes XII–XIV, Faida I–III, Maltai I–IV.

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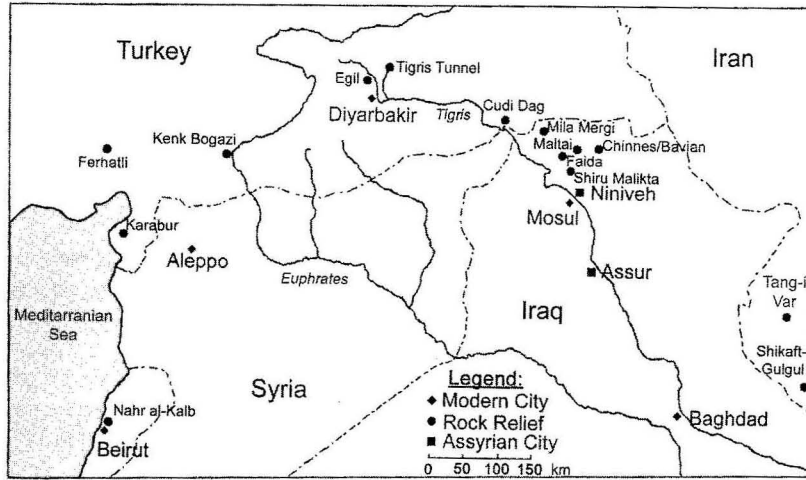


Fig. 1 Map showing the locations of the Neo-Assyrian Rock Reliefs

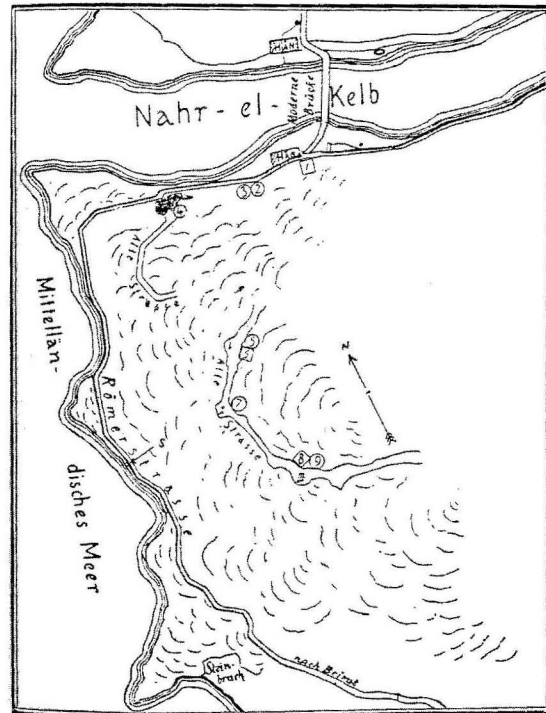


Fig. 2 Sketch of the mouth of Nahr al-Kalb around 1887
from: F. H. Weissbach 1922: Fig. 3

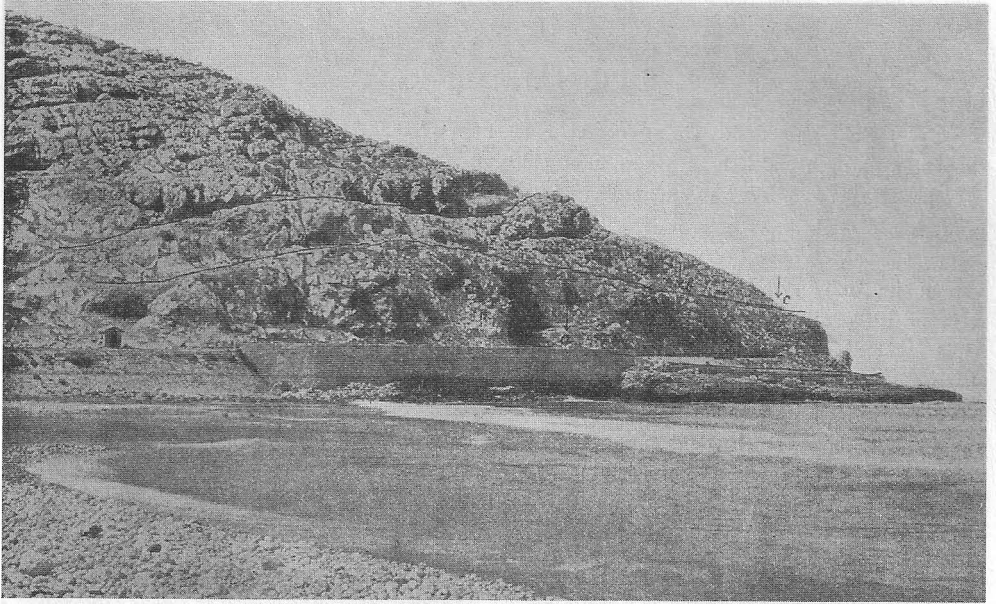


Fig. 3 Nahr al-Kalb: mouth and foothills around 1900
from: F. H. Weissbach 1922: Fig. 1

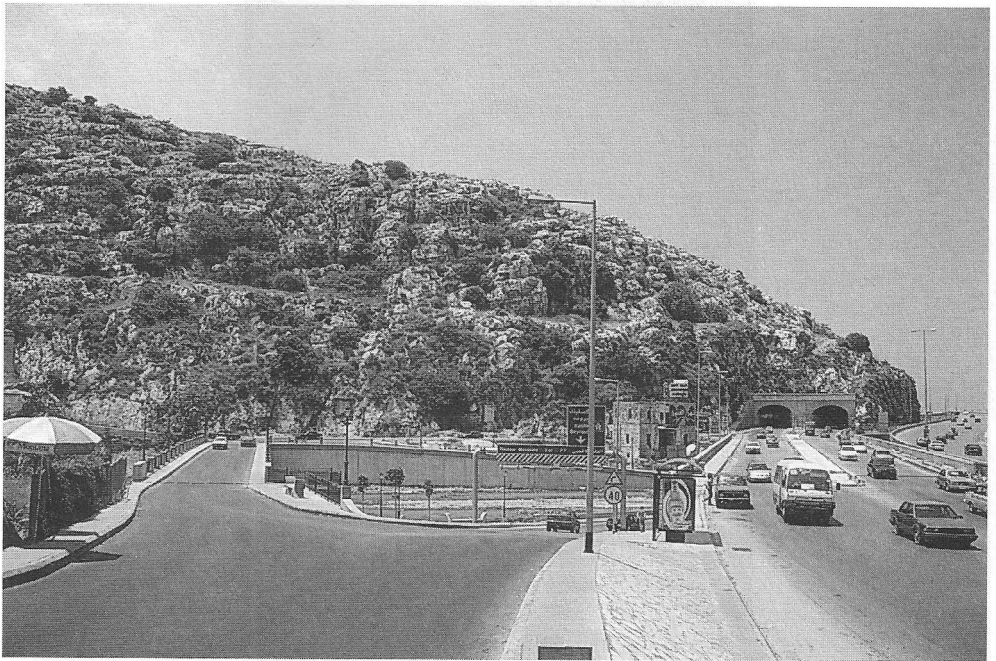


Fig. 4 Nahr al Kalb: the situation today
Photo: F.J. Kreppner 6/2000

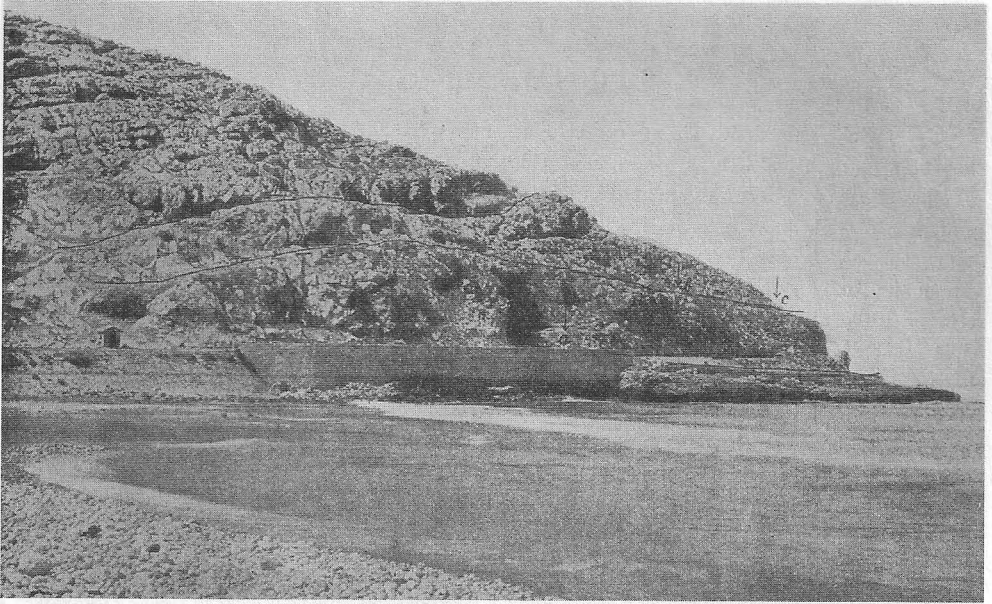


Fig. 3 Nahr al-Kalb: mouth and foothills around 1900
from: F. H. Weissbach 1922: Fig. 1

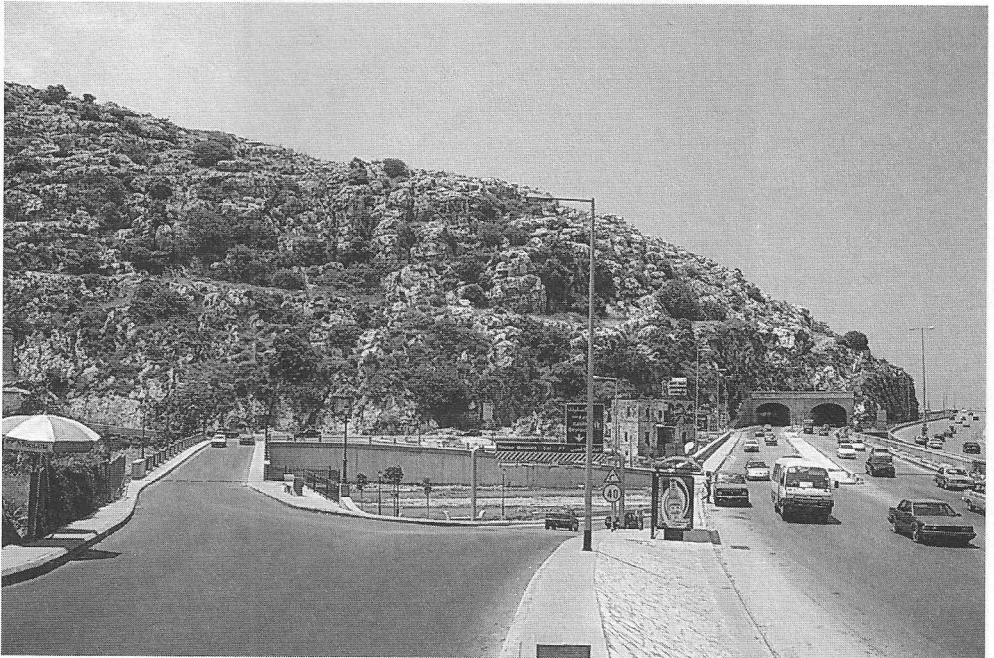


Fig. 4 Nahr al Kalb: the situation today
Photo: F. J. Kreppner 6/2000



Fig. 5 Assyrian (left) and Egyptian (right) rock relief side by side (cf. Nos. 5 and 6 on Fig. 2)
Photo: F.J. Kreppner 6/2000

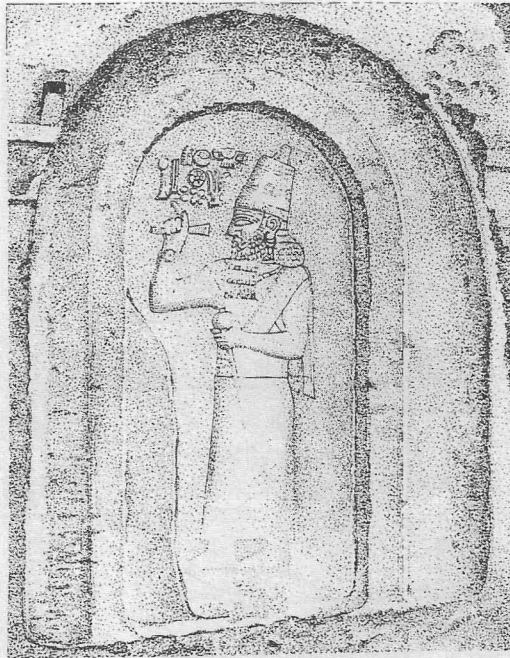


Fig. 6 Rock relief of Esarhaddon (cf. No. 9 on Fig. 2)
from: Börker-Klähn 1982: No. 216

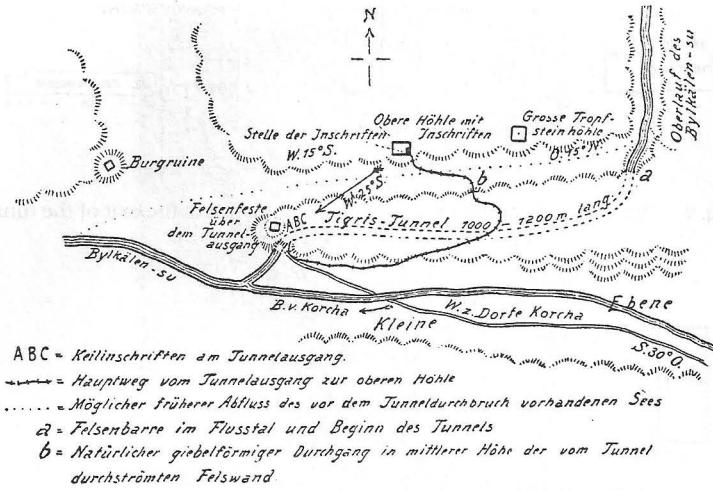


Fig. 7 Tigris Tunnel: sketch of the site
 from: C. F. Lehmann-Haupt 1910: Fig. on p. 451

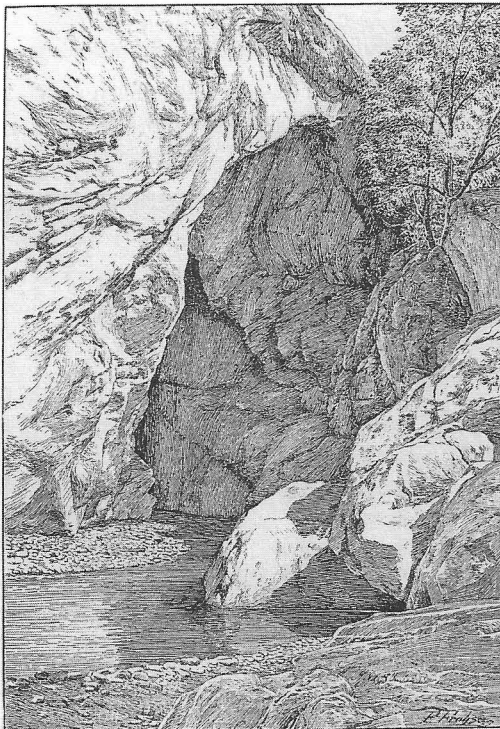


Fig. 8 Exit of the Tigris Tunnel
 from: C. F. Lehmann-Haupt: 1910: Fig. on p. 435

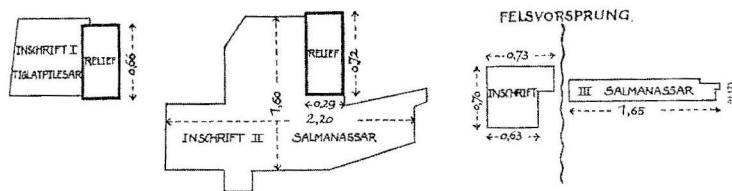


Fig. 9 Tigris Tunnel: arrangement of the monuments at the exit of the tunnel
from: E. Unger 1920: Fig. 3

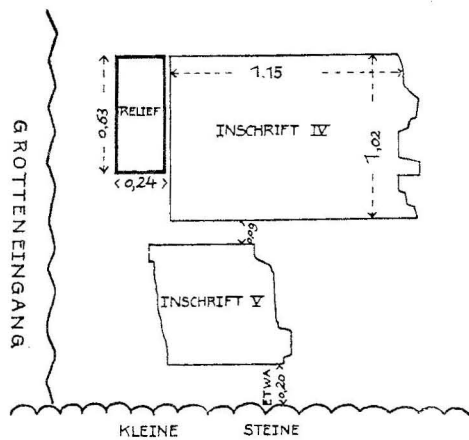


Fig. 10 Tigris Tunnel: arrangement of the monuments at the upper grotto
from: E. Unger 1920: Fig. 2



Fig. 11 Rock relief of Tiglath-Pileser I
from: Börker-Klähn 1982: No. 130

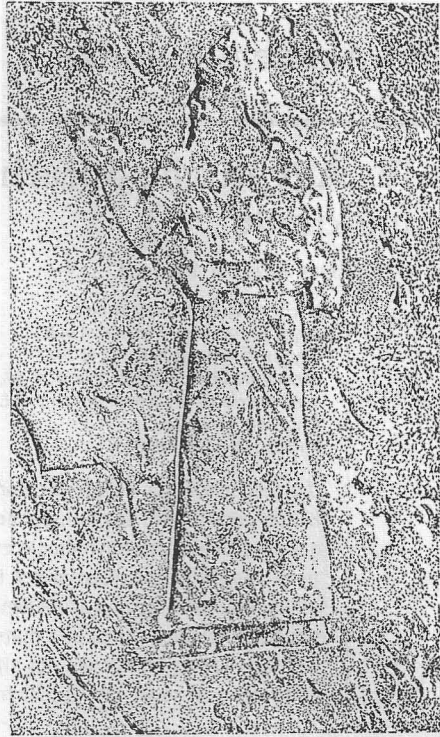


Fig. 12 Rock relief of Shalmaneser III from the upper grotto
from: Börker-Klähn 1982: No. 149

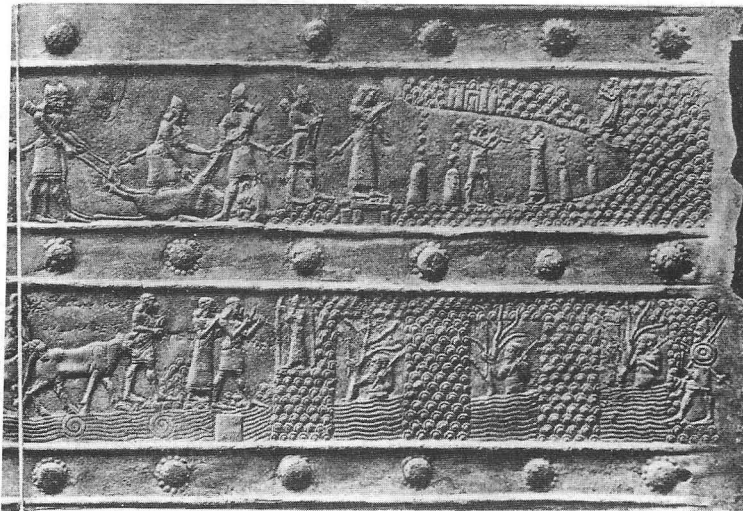


Fig. 13 Bronze Gate of Balawat, Plate D (J) 7 showing the carving of the
rock reliefs at the Tigris Tunnel: upper register with the upper grotto, lower
register with the Tigris Tunnel from: E. Unger 1920: Pl. III