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The God Aššur in the Maltai Rock Reliefs: A Historical Study

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Abstract

Religion occupied a central place in the lives of ancient societies and was among the principal forces shaping their institutions, collective behaviour, customs, legal traditions, and artistic production. Religious ideas provided not only a framework for ritual practice, but also a language through which political authority and social order were articulated. Within the Neo-Assyrian state, Aššur stood at the apex of the divine hierarchy and functioned simultaneously as the tutelary god of the city of Aššur, the national deity of Assyria, and the ultimate source of royal legitimacy. This study examines the religious and political significance of Aššur as represented in the Maltai rock reliefs, with particular attention to the procession of deities, the position of Sennacherib, and the use of monumental imagery as a medium of imperial communication.

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Introduction

The Assyrian Empire became one of the most powerful political entities in the ancient Near East. It had an efficient administrative system, a well-organised army and a royal ideology combining military power with divine sanction that fuelled its territorial expansion. Visual and textual media were also used systematically by Assyrian kings. Palace reliefs, stelae, rock carvings and monumental inscriptions recorded military campaigns, building projects, ritual performances and meetings with foreign rulers. Such monuments are therefore vital sources for the reconstruction of Assyrian political history and for an understanding of how royal authority was represented to subjects, allies and enemies.

The visual programme of Assyrian kingship did not only record events. It selected, organised and amplified certain themes: the king as triumphant warrior, devout builder, protector of order and the chosen representative of the gods. Pictures of conquest and punishment could serve to intimidate, while pictures of worship and divine procession stressed the king's dependence upon

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and privileged access to the divine world. The Maltai reliefs are a result of this broader ideological context. Their placement, size, and repetitive composition suggest a deliberately planned statement about divine protection, imperial presence, and the authority of Sennacherib in a strategically important region.

Research Questions, Method, and Scope

The study addresses four principal questions: Who were the Assyrians in their historical setting? Where are the Maltai reliefs located, and when were they identified by modern explorers? How was Aššur understood within Assyrian religion? What political and propagandistic functions did his image serve in the Maltai reliefs? The study follows a descriptive and analytical method. Its chronological focus is the Neo-Assyrian period (911–612 BCE), although earlier developments are considered where necessary to explain the rise of Aššur and the evolution of Assyrian religious symbolism.

The discussion is organised into five sections: (1) a historical introduction to the Assyrians; (2) the location and modern discovery of the reliefs; (3) their designation and visual description; (4) the religious status and symbols of Aššur; and (5) the political symbolism of Aššur at Maltai as an instrument of royal communication.

1. Historical Background: The Assyrians

Assyria emerged in northern Mesopotamia around the city of Aššur on the Tigris. Older scholarship often attempted to explain the population of Assyria through broad migration models, but current historical practice treats Assyrian identity as the product of long-term urban, linguistic, political, and cultural development in northern Mesopotamia. The territorial core of Assyria extended along both banks of the Tigris and included the regions of the Upper and Lower Zab rivers. The term Subartu, attested in Mesopotamian sources, could designate northern regions and populations, but it should not be treated as a simple or permanent synonym for Assyria. Assyrian history is conventionally divided into three major periods: Old Assyrian, Middle Assyrian, and Neo-Assyrian.

1.1 The Old Assyrian Period (ca. 2000–1521 BCE)

The Old Assyrian period followed the collapse of the Third Dynasty of Ur and extended into the middle of the second millennium BCE. A major body of evidence comes from the Assyrian commercial colonies in Anatolia, especially the kārum at Kaneš (modern Kültepe) in Cappadocia. The archives recovered from these settlements illuminate the activities of Assyrian merchants, their family networks, commercial contracts, religious practices, and relations with Anatolian rulers. The Akkadian term kārum originally denoted a quay or harbour district and came to designate a merchant quarter and its governing institution, which performed functions comparable in some respects to those of a commercial chamber.

1.2 The Middle Assyrian Period (ca. 1521–911 BCE)

The Middle Assyrian period witnessed major political and social transformations. In its earlier phase, Assyria operated within a regional system shaped by Mitanni, Hittite Anatolia, Kassite Babylonia, and the polities of the eastern and northern highlands. Assyrian rulers faced pressure upon trade routes and frontier districts, while relations with Babylonia alternated between conflict,

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negotiated boundaries, and periods of accommodation. Aššur-uballiṭ I (ca. 1365–1330 BCE) played a decisive role in establishing Assyria as an independent great power after the decline of Mitanni. Later kings, including Shalmaneser I, Tukulti-Ninurta I, and Tiglath-pileser I, campaigned extensively to secure frontiers, protect communications, and obtain access to strategic resources. These developments created important precedents for the political and military institutions of the Neo-Assyrian period.

1.3 The Neo-Assyrian Period (911–612 BCE)

The accession of Adad-nērārī II in 911 BCE marked the beginning of a new phase of Assyrian expansion. Over the following three centuries Assyria became the dominant power of the ancient Near East. Historians commonly distinguish an earlier imperial phase (911–745 BCE) from the period of intensified centralisation and expansion inaugurated by Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BCE). Neo-Assyrian kings combined annual campaigns, provincial reorganisation, deportation, tribute, dynastic diplomacy, and monumental building in order to maintain control over a geographically diverse empire.

Tiglath-pileser III initiated far-reaching administrative and military reforms. Shalmaneser V continued Assyrian operations in the west, including the siege of Samaria. Sargon II (722–705 BCE) and Sennacherib (704–681 BCE) campaigned on several frontiers and undertook major building programmes. Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE) sought to regulate the succession by designating Ashurbanipal as crown prince of Assyria and Šamaš-šumu-ukīn as ruler of Babylonia, arrangements supported by formal loyalty oaths. Under Ashurbanipal (669–ca. 631/627 BCE), Assyria reached a final peak of military and cultural power, but internal conflict and renewed Babylonian and Median resistance weakened the empire. Nabopolassar established an independent Babylonian dynasty, and the alliance between Babylonia and the Medes culminated in the capture of Nineveh in 612 BCE and the subsequent collapse of Assyrian imperial rule.

2. Location and History of the Reliefs' Discovery

The Maltai rock reliefs are situated approximately seven kilometres south-west of the centre of Duhok, on the lower slope of the mountain known locally as Zawa–Shindukha, opposite the village of Kafarki. The rock face rises above a landscape that controlled movement between the Duhok plain and routes leading toward the Assyrian heartland. The antiquity of the site was officially registered in the Iraqi Gazette, no. 1465, dated 17 October 1935, and the Iraqi Directorate-General of Antiquities opened a special dossier for the monument under file no. 188.

The reliefs entered modern archaeological literature during the nineteenth century. They were reported on 12 October 1845 by Rouet, the French consul in Mosul. Austen Henry Layard visited the site in 1846 and referred to the monuments. In 1898–1899, the German scholar Carl Friedrich Lehmann-Haupt documented the reliefs and identified the fourth panel more clearly, providing photographs and descriptions. Leonard William King visited in 1904 and again in 1913. Victor Place and other travellers and archaeologists also contributed to the growing record of the site. The sequence of reports reflects the gradual incorporation of Maltai into the archaeological geography of northern Iraq.

3. Name and Description of the Reliefs

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The modern designation “Maltai” is associated with Tell Malta, a large circular archaeological mound located opposite the reliefs on the eastern side of the Duhok–Mosul road. Surface pottery indicates occupation during the Assyrian period. The mound has sometimes been associated with the Assyrian place-name Maliati, interpreted in local scholarship as an entrance or passage, and it may have served as a fortified point controlling an important corridor. Local inhabitants have also referred to the rock-cut monuments by a Kurdish name rendered in Arabic sources as Shkafta Halamata.

The monument consists of four sculpted friezes cut into a limestone ridge. Each panel occupies a rectangular field measuring approximately 5.75 × 2.20 metres, adjusted to the available surface of the rock. No cuneiform inscription is preserved on the friezes. Each panel repeats substantially the same divine procession. Sennacherib stands before the deities and is accompanied by an additional human figure. The sequence represented in the reliefs has generally been identified as follows:

the Assyrian king, Sennacherib;
the god Aššur;
the goddess Mullissu/Ninlil;
the moon-god Sîn;
the god Nabû;
the sun-god Šamaš;
the storm-god Adad;
the goddess Ištar; and
an attendant or accompanying figure whose identification remains uncertain.

The repetition of the scene across four panels creates a monumental visual rhythm. The king’s position before the divine assembly is not merely devotional. It situates his authority within a divinely ordered hierarchy and inscribes Assyrian kingship into the surrounding landscape.

4. Aššur and His Religious Status

The name Aššur refers both to the ancient city and its chief god. The divine name in Akkadian is written Aššur. The complex history of the cult is reflected in the older Sumerian logographic writings and later theological interpretations. The consort of the god was usually identified as Mullissu, the Assyrian form of Ninlil. Theological assimilation may have linked other goddesses, especially Ištar in her main Assyrian cult centres of Nineveh and Arbela, with the divine and royal ideology focused on Aššur.

Aššur was worshipped in the principal cities of Assyria: Assur, Kalḫu, and Nineveh. He became the national god of the Assyrian state and was in a similar position to Enlil in Nippur and Marduk in Babylon in other regional traditions. Royal decisions, campaigns, tribute and territorial expansion were expressed as acts done by the command of Aššur and for the enlargement of his dominion. That is not to say that every administrative act was literally issued as a temple decree. Official ideology rather pictured the king as the earthly executor of Aššur’s will.

The main temple of Aššur was in the city called Aššur. The temple complex, often referred to as Ešarra (“House of the Universe” or “House of Totality”), was the Assyrian state’s religious centre. Aššur was called “great mountain,” “lord of the lands,” “father of the gods,” and “king of the

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totality." His name was used in royal names like Aššur-nāṣir-apli ("Aššur is the protector of the heir") and Aššur-bāni-apli ("Aššur is the creator of the heir"). Theological texts also helped to propagate Aššur by identifying him with other supreme gods. In an Assyrian adaptation of the Babylonian creation epic, the name of Aššur could replace that of Marduk, thus translating the cosmic kingship of the Babylonian deity into an Assyrian context. Such reinterpretations were not mere acts of substitution, but learned theological statements that placed Assyria and its god at the centre of universal order.

4.1 The Winged Disc

One of the most famous symbols associated with Aššur is the winged disc. In Assyrian art it may have an anthropomorphic figure, holding a bow, extending a hand, or emerging from the central disc. The image is closely tied to royal power, divine protection and military victory. In the battle imagery the god stands above the king and army, visually expressing the belief that Assyrian warfare was fought under divine command. Texts might employ metaphors of storm and wind to illustrate the destructive power of the god, portraying Aššur as the force that scatters enemies and instils fear among their ranks.

The winged disc appears in other compositions, above a stylised sacred tree or in scenes of ritual attendance. The seal designs may have a royal or protective figure on either side of the tree, with the winged emblem in the upper centre. The symbol appears also on royal stelae and on reliefs in palaces, including those of the period of Shalmaneser III. Its meaning changed according to context, but it always indicated the presence of transcendent authority and the relationship between king, gods and the ordered world.

4.2 The Horned Crown

The horned crown was a conventional marker of divinity in Mesopotamian art. As Aššur assumed the highest position in the Assyrian pantheon, the horned headdress functioned as one of his emblems. It appears on royal monuments, amulets, pendants, and ritual regalia. Assyrian kings displayed divine symbols during ceremonies in order to emphasise their piety and their proximity to the gods, while carefully maintaining the conceptual distinction between king and deity. The association of crowns, precious metals, and horns with Aššur therefore signified divine sovereignty rather than the deification of the king himself.

4.3 The Divine Weapon or Dagger

A weapon, sometimes described as a dagger or sword, also served as an emblem of Aššur. From the second millennium BCE onward, divine weapons were displayed in sanctuaries, used in oath rituals, and invoked in judicial and political contexts. In Neo-Assyrian royal discourse the "weapon of Aššur" could embody the irresistible force of the god and the coercive authority exercised by the king. Ashurbanipal's communications with Babylonian cities and Tiglath-pileser III's references to establishing the divine weapon in conquered centres illustrate the political force of the symbol. Installing such an emblem made Assyrian sovereignty materially visible and integrated a conquered city into the sacred geography of empire.

5. The Political Symbolism of Aššur at Maltai: Royal Communication and Imperial Ideology

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The monumental reliefs and inscriptions are fundamental sources for the history of the ancient Mesopotamian kingship. Rulers commemorated military victories, building works, cultic acts, and the restoration of cities on stelae, foundation deposits, palace slabs and rock faces. These two sets of records were aimed at different audiences. Some were examined by court officials, envoys from foreign countries, troops, and the local population; others were buried for the gods and for the rulers of the future. It had functions of commemoration, legitimation, warning, ritual dedication and projection of an ideal image of kingship.

Assyrian royal art regularly emphasised the successful aspects of rule. The king is shown as physically intact, ritually correct, militarily victorious, and administratively successful. Images of defeated enemies and punished rebels communicated the consequences of resistance, while scenes of construction and worship advertised prosperity, divine favour and the restoration of order. The ideological programme did not neutrally reflect political reality. It translated the instability and violence of empire into a controlled visual narrative in which the king always fulfills the command of the gods.

The presence of suitable stone in northern Mesopotamia fostered the development of large-scale sculpture. Assyrian palaces were decorated with orthostats bearing reliefs of campaigns, hunts, tribute processions, cultic scenes and building activities. Cuneiform captions and annalistic texts were often cut across the reliefs, binding image and inscription into one statement. The size of the royal figures, their formal poses, and the repetitive composition of scenes communicated hierarchy and permanence. The monumentality rendered certain historical acts timeless expressions of legitimate rule.

In Assyrian religious thought, the gods ruled the cosmos and maintained the proper order of the land. The king stood before them as the elected servant and representative of them all, to keep their temples, to sacrifice, to vanquish their enemies, to extend the domain which had been given to him in order. Thus the palace decoration had its political and apotropaic dimensions. Divine and protective figures guarded entrances and throne rooms and the images of Aššur above the king connected the centre of government to the highest divine authority.

The Maltai reliefs should be read in this ideological system. They were set in an open landscape and took royal imagery out of the palace and urban ceremonial centre. The gods, headed by Aššur, marched in procession, again and again, Sennacherib in attendance. This claimed that Assyrian power in the region was under divine endorsement. The reliefs also functioned as a sacred and political marker along a strategic route. For travellers, officials, soldiers, and local peoples, the monument made the imperial order visible in the landscape itself through which they moved.

The Maltai reliefs should thus be interpreted as a type of royal propaganda, but the modern term “propaganda” should be used with caution. They did not fulfill the same role as the modern mass media. Their operation was through monumentality, repetition, ritual association, restricted iconographic literacy and the authority of place. The king was depicted as the pious intermediary between Assyria and the gods and Aššur was depicted as the divine guarantor of conquest, order and territorial possession.

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Conclusion

This study reaches four principal conclusions:

Historical development. Assyria was a northern Mesopotamian state whose identity developed across the Old, Middle, and Neo-Assyrian periods. The Neo-Assyrian age (911–612 BCE) represented the culmination of Assyrian political and military power and produced a highly developed language of imperial representation.

Geographical and strategic significance. The location of the Maltai reliefs on the slope of Zawa–Shindukha, opposite Tell Malta and close to an important corridor, was deliberate. The monument asserted Assyrian presence in a landscape of movement, frontier administration, and communication.

The religious supremacy of Aššur. Aššur became the principal deity of the Assyrian state and the ultimate source of royal legitimacy. His winged disc, horned crown, and divine weapon expressed distinct but overlapping aspects of protection, sovereignty, cosmic order, and military power.

Political and communicative function. The four repeated friezes at Maltai, showing Sennacherib before the divine procession headed by Aššur, transformed the rock face into a statement of divine kingship. The reliefs affirmed the king's legitimacy, warned against resistance, monumentalised Assyrian authority, and associated the imperial landscape with the presence of the gods.

Figures and Plates

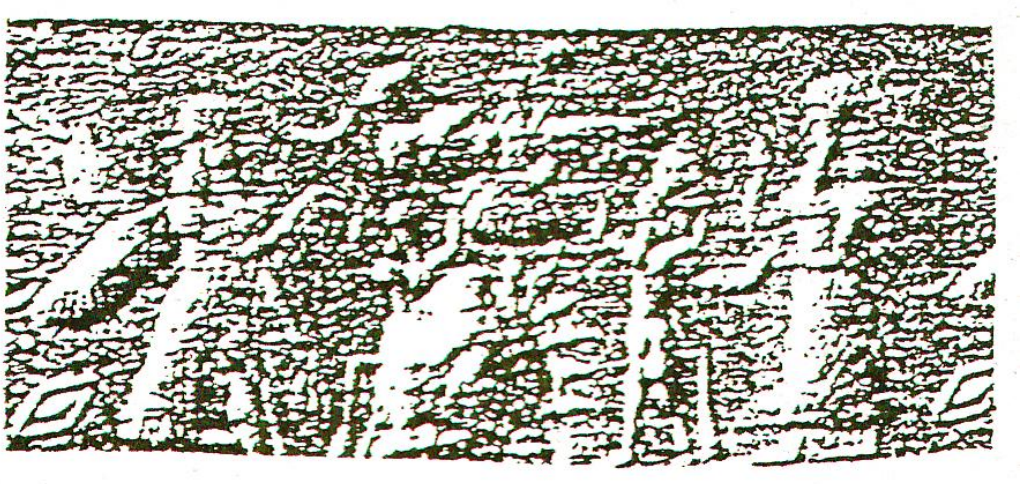


Figure 1. Image reproduced from the Arabic manuscript and its cited source.

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Figure 2. Image reproduced from the Arabic manuscript and its cited source.

Notes on Terminology and Editorial Treatment

The present English version is an academic translation and stylistic revision rather than a word-for-word rendering. Obvious repetitions, typographical corruption, and syntactic fragments in the Arabic manuscript have been regularised. Divine and royal names follow common Assyriological forms (Aššur, Sennacherib, Tiglath-pileser, Ashurbanipal, Nabû, Šamaš, and Ištar). The translation also distinguishes between direct political control and the symbolic, institutional, and religious claims expressed in Assyrian royal ideology.

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