

# A Story of a Holy Temple

## Ain Dara, Syria



Manuscript: **Timothy Hogue**

Supervision: **Yoko Taniguchi**

Illustrator: **Ayumi Ikarashi**

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RESEARCH CENTER FOR  
WEST ASIAN CIVILIZATION



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## **Dedication**

The temple of Ain Dara is one of the most important temples excavated in Syria. The temple was built in the 2nd millennium BC, and it is famous for its limestone floor imprinted with giant footprints. It is also known for its Hittite and Syro-Hittite (or Neo-Hittite) sculptures, which survived into the 1st millennium BC and beyond. These include intricate stone lions, sphinxes, and walls decorated with mythical creatures, floral patterns, and geometric designs.

Unfortunately, the temple was partially destroyed in 2018 and many of its distinctive architectural and decorative elements are gone. However, we hope this pamphlet will shed light on one of Syria's invaluable heritage sites that played an essential role in human history. The temple is a part of Syria's cultural memory in general, and the Afrin region's people in particular. We therefore present them with this work.

## **Acknowledgments**

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# A Story of a Holy Temple

Ain Dara, Syria



Ain Dara was a very ordinary city in the Afrin Valley in the prefecture of Aleppo.

It was a place for common people. No one rich or famous lived there. There were no fancy palaces or big houses. The only thing in the city that was extraordinary was the temple.

The temple was very old. Maybe more than 3,500 years old. No one remembered when it was first built, because the people of Ain Dara did not write things down.





It was originally made from mudbricks but later covered over by bare stone slabs.

The temple was not decorated, but it was one of the biggest stone temples in ancient Syria. It was huge even though it was built in a very ordinary town. It was the only building in the city built in that way, so it must have been very important to the people.

There are other temples like the one at Ain Dara in Syria, but one thing is completely unique. There were giant footprints carved into the stones inside the temple.



The footprints were bigger than any man could make. Each was a meter long, and they are so far apart that if someone had made them he would have to be 20 meters tall.

The footprints made the people feel small. And they made them amazed at the size of their god. When the people saw the footprints, they made them feel like they were not the only ones in the temple and the temple was not built for them. It was built for their god, who walked before them.



We do not know which god the people worshipped, because the temple originally included no images or texts. But the footprints showed the people how their god walked, and so they showed the people how they should walk as well.

First, they would climb up from the town.



Then they would wash themselves and make water offerings at the stone basin in front of the temple.



After they were cleansed, they could enter the temple.



Inside, parents pointed at the footprints and taught their children the proper motions.



The people believed that they could meet the god if they followed in his footsteps. Only they knew exactly how to do this and which god it was. For many years, the people of Ain Dara were left alone to worship their god as they chose. But this did not last.

Many people wanted to control Ain Dara and its people. Emperors and kings wanted to claim the city as their own. So those emperors and kings brought new religious art and practices to the temple.

Because the temple was so important to the people of Ain Dara, those outside rulers thought they could use it to control the people. If they could tell the people who and how to worship, they thought they could tell them to do other things too.



First came the Hittites.

They built one of the greatest empires in ancient history. From his capital city at Hattusa, the emperor ruled all of Anatolia and Syria.



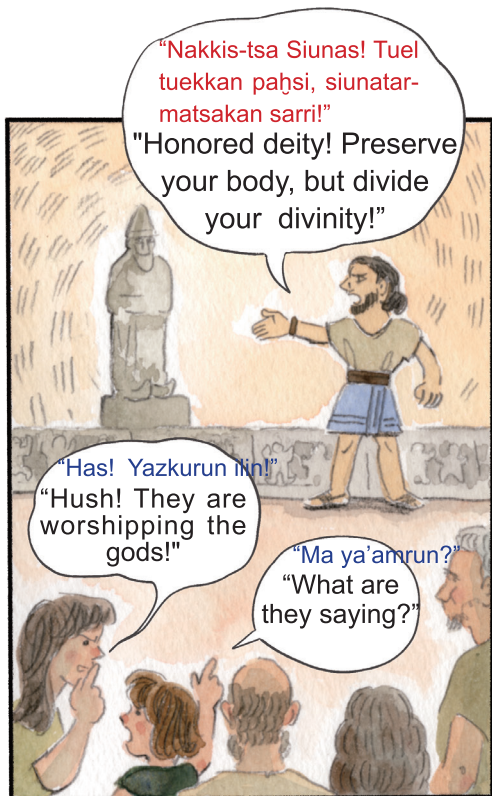


And one way he controlled so much land was by controlling religious places.

The Hittites worshipped 1,000 gods. They studied difficult theology and carried out complicated rituals. Every time they went somewhere new, they tried to learn about that place's gods and how to worship them. But they also tried to change the worship, to show that they were in control.

When the Hittites found the bare temple at Ain Dara, they saw an opportunity. They put up stone sculptures to show which gods were there. But they brought the gods from Anatolia, instead of worshipping the god of Ain Dara.

They brought their mountain god, Sharruma, and the goddess of love and war, Shaushga, and finally their Storm-god. The priests tried to explain how the gods had come from Anatolia to be worshipped in Syria. They taught them new words in Hittite to speak in their rituals.

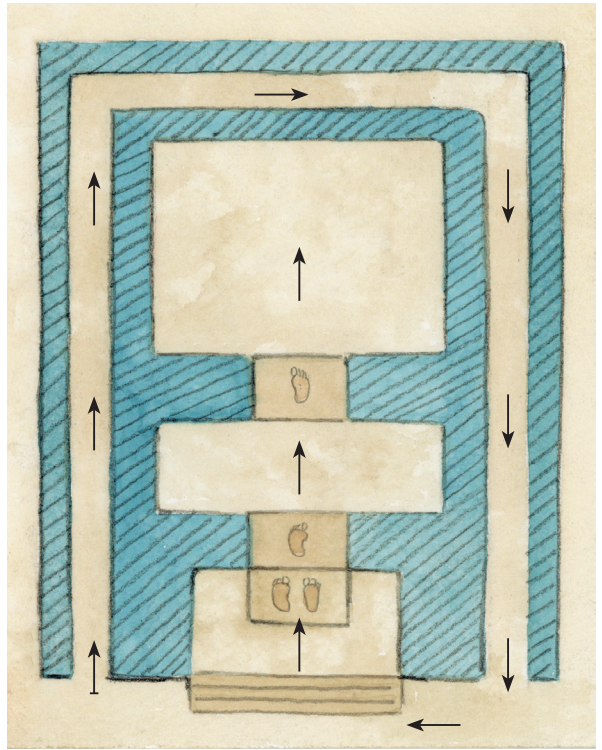


Next came the Neo-Hittite kingdom of Umq (Amuq). When the Hittites disappeared from Syria, many smaller kingdoms tried to claim their land and traditions. The kings of Umq took Hittite names.



They spoke one of the sacred Hittite languages – Luwian. And, like the Hittites before them, the Neo-Hittites tried to control more land by taking over religious places.

They came to Ain Dara and changed the temple again. They built a columned portico like the one in their capital city of Kunalua. They surrounded the temple with a new gallery of sphinxes and lions, and they expected the people to walk around the gallery before entering the temple.





In the center of the new decorations, they set up an image of their king. They set up inscriptions in Luwian that no one could read. They read them out for the people, telling them how to worship at the temple.

Zati-pa-wa kuis awita massani  
iziyuna, awas ħawin karatu.

"Whoever comes here to worship  
this god, let him sacrifice a sheep!"



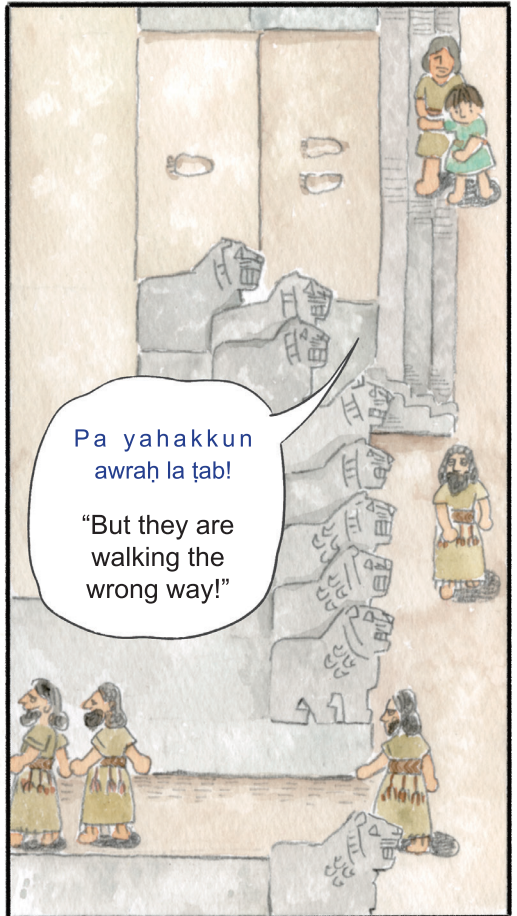
Has! Yazkurun ilin!  
"Hush! They are  
worshipping the gods!"

Ma ya'amrun?  
"What are  
they saying?"



Pa yahakkun  
awraĥ la taḅ!

"But they are  
walking the  
wrong way!"



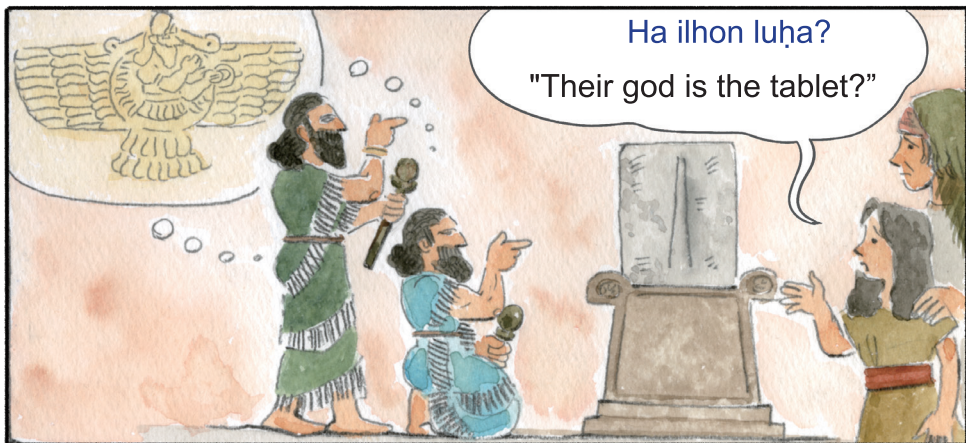
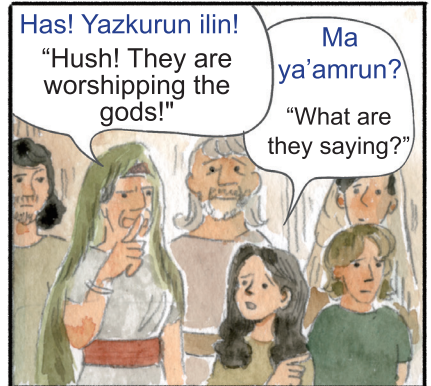
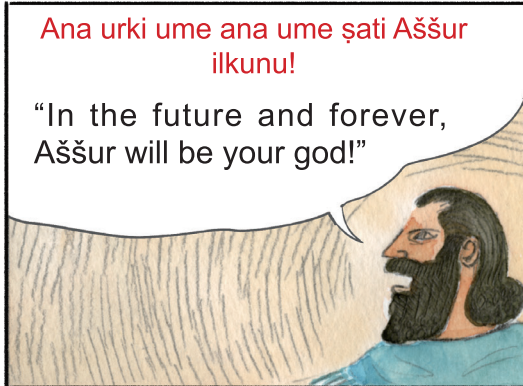


Next came the Assyrians. Almost 450 years after the Hittites disappeared, the Assyrians built an even bigger empire. Ruling from northern Iraq, they spread across all of West Asia. They conquered Umq, and they destroyed Ain Dara and its temple. They made everyone ruled by the kings of Umq – including the people of Ain Dara – swear allegiance to the Assyrian king and his god.



The Assyrians also thought that if they could tell people who and how to worship, they could tell them to do other things too.

So they made a new ritual for all the people of the land to do. Standing before the altar, the Assyrians taught them new words to speak in their ritual.



Eventually, the Assyrians themselves were conquered, and many cities were affected when the empire crumbled. Ain Dara was later resettled, but its previous history was forgotten.



All that was left of the original city was a very old Syrian temple filled with Hittite sculptures and Neo-Hittite art and inscriptions. And there was also a set of footprints. Carved into the stone, these seemed to be walking into the temple for over 3,000 years.

Greeks and Romans tried to figure out what they meant, and finally so did modern scholars. Now, we know that together these different pieces tell the story of ancient Ain Dara.













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