

Historically and Archaeologically, Nothing is Kurdish in Northeast Syria

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From 1935 – 1937, English novelist Agatha Christie visited several Syrian cities with her second husband Max Mallowan, a prominent British archaeologist, who specialized in ancient Near East history. They were part of several excavation trips in the Syrian al-Jazeera region, northeast Syria. The ancient towns, rivers, and hills of the Syria's al-Jazeera – full of secrets, mystery, and magic – inspired the British writer with ideas for her novels.



Agatha Christie during her visit to Hadattu with the basalt made lion of the Assyrian era.

The fact that we need to emphasize here is that those excavations and the history of northeastern Syria do not support any claims of Kurdish presence in the region. Nothing archaeological or historical supports Kurdish nationalists empty claims regarding the so-called Kurdishness of northeast Syria's al-Jazeera region.

Lets consider the followings:

Hadattu (Arslan Tash¹) district is one of the oldest continuously inhabited ancient archaeological sites, where historical documents indicate that many civilizations dominated the region, most notably in the first half of the first millennium BC where Arameans and Assyrians ruled the region.² Many antiques were found in the region of Hadattu most of which date back to new Assyrian period, many of them were transferred to Istanbul Museum.³ Hadattu was abandoned because of the severe weather conditions, but with the return of stable climate in the region, Assyrian King Shamshi-Adad made it a regional agricultural center with hundreds of villages around it being settled.

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arslan_Tash_reliefs

2 <https://www.hittitemonuments.com/arslantas2/>

3 <https://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/after-37-years-one-lion-of-sheeran-returns-home-h20337.html>

The ancient city of Hadattu with its archaeological Assyrian era basalt made lions⁴ was never a Kurdish city. The Kurdish Kobani or Sheran or the Turkish name Arslan Tash⁵ have been imposed on it.

Shekhna (Tell⁶ Leilan) is one of the major archaeological site situated in Al-Hasakah Governorate, northeastern Syria, a region formerly a part of ancient Assyria. During the late third millennium, the site was known as Shekhna. Around 1800 BC, the site was renamed "Shubat-Enlil" by the Assyrian king, Shamshi-Adad I and it became the capital of Assyria in northern Mesopotamia. Shubat-Enlil was abandoned around 1700 BC.⁷ During the 2006 season, 245 archaeological samples dating to the Akkadian and post-Akkadian occupation phases were collected from the large Administrative Building complex on the Acropolis Northwest.⁸

Equally significant, Tell Leilan also offered definition of an early historic developmental paradigm. On May 21, 1878 Hormuzd Rassam looked south from the crest of Do Gir, along the road from Turbe Spid (Qubur el-Bid, Khatuniyah) to Nasibin, and on the horizon spied Tell Leilan, which he was "told has a wall round it like most of the Assyrian sites of importance". Thereafter, Assyriologists and archaeologists frequently visited the site, and by mid-century had speculated often that it was ancient Šubat-Enlil, the capital city of Šamšī-Adad's "Kingdom of Upper Mesopotamia". In the summer of 1978, the nascent Tell Leilan Project generated the first map of Leilan, its wall-enclosed 90 hectare topography, its 15-hectare Acropolis alongside the Wadi Jarrah, and the surface ceramic distributions to encourage archaeological excavations, regional surveys, and paleoenvironmental researches.⁹

Tell Leilan remained a capital of the region with elaborate decorated administrative buildings such as the Acropolis temples. The lower town palace of Shamshi-Adad and 800 tablets were discovered in 1985 and 1987. Also, two unique documents as part of a large tablet describe the treaty between Ashur and king Till-Abnu. The reign of Till Abnu and his brother Yakun-Ashar ended with the 1728 BC conquering of the Babylonian Samsu-Iluna.¹⁰

Guzana (Tell Halaf)

From his base in Cairo, Egypt in 1899, Oppenheim set off on a seven-month-long expedition through Syria, Upper Mesopotamia, and Eastern Turkey. In the headwaters of the River Khabur in north-eastern Syria he discovered an ancient mound called Guzana¹¹ Tell Halaf, where in 1911–1913 and 1929 he carried out privately financed excavations. Among his most sensational finds were several monumental stone sculptures and relief slabs dating from the early first millennium BC. They originated from the period when Tell Halaf was the site of Guzana, the capital of a Late Hittite-Aramaean kingdom.

The first settlers arrived at Tell Halaf in the Late Neolithic (8000 years ago). When the Assyrians invaded the region in the 9th century BC they turned Guzana into a provincial capital. The Bible describes how the inhabitants of Samaria were deported to the upper reaches of the Khabur following the conquest of the city by Sargon II (721–705 BC). The place retained its importance even in the Neo-

4 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arslan_Tash_reliefs

5 The modern Turkish Arslan Tash is the ancient Assyrian city of Hadattu. See Parpola, Simo and Michael Porter. The Helsinki Atlas of the Near East in the Neo-Assyrian Period. The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001.

6 Tell means mound

7 https://archiqoo.com/locations/tell_leilan.php

8 <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Akkadian-and-post-Akkadian-Plant-Use-at-Tell-Leilan-Smith/237950a3094f25c6abf2664fbd64ec53db037b2e>

9 <http://ancientworldonline.blogspot.com/2012/07/tell-leilan-project-online.html>

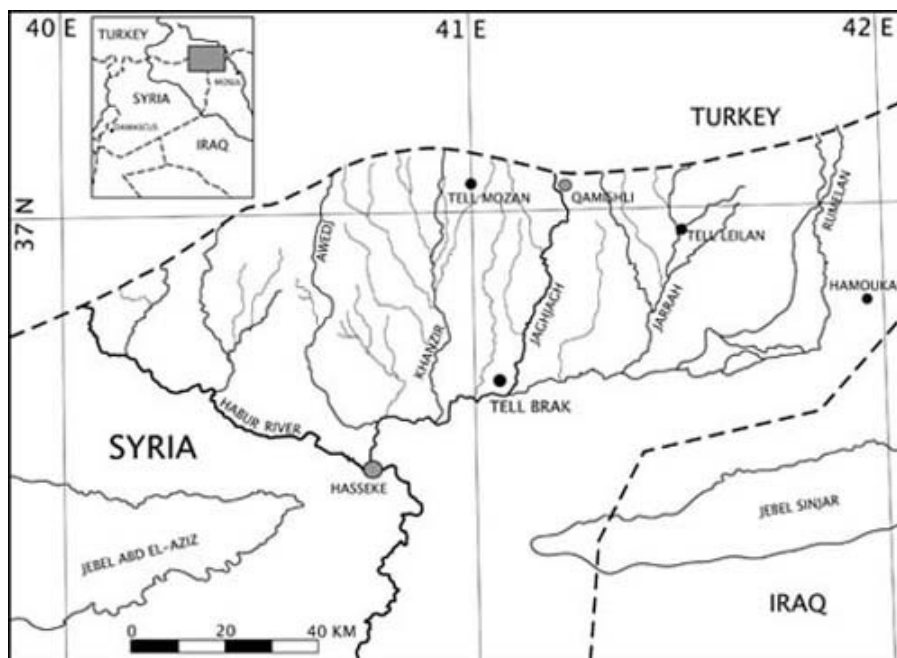
10 https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1029&context=anthro_papers

11 Tell Halaf ancient Assyrian name is Guzana. See Parpola, Simo and Michael Porter. The Helsinki Atlas of the Near East in the Neo-Assyrian Period. The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001.

Babylonian period following the fall of the Assyrian Empire. New excavations by Syrian and German archaeologists in 2006–2010 unearthed proof that Guzana had been a place of some standing even in the Achaemenid Period (6th–4th century BC) and then the Hellenistic Period. It was abandoned permanently only in the 2nd century BC.¹²

Nilibshi (Tell Brak)

Lastly, but not least, in another site of Tell Brak (Nilibshi)¹³ the Naram-Sin fortress is a witness of the Assyrian domination of the city. Tell Brak, in the Upper Khabur region of northeast Syria, is one of northern Mesopotamia's largest ancient sites and among the world's earliest cities. It was first photographed from the air by Fr Pierre Poidebard in the 1920s and was first excavated by Sir Max Mallowan in 1937-8. Excavations were resumed by David and Joan Oates in 1976.¹⁴ Starting as a small settlement in the seventh millennium BC, Tell Brak evolved during the fourth millennium BC into one of the biggest cities in Upper Mesopotamia and interacted with the cultures of southern Mesopotamia. The city shrank in size at the beginning of the third millennium BC with the end of Uruk period, before expanding again around c. 2600 BC, when it became known as Nagar, and was the capital of a regional kingdom that controlled the Khabur river valley. Nagar was destroyed around c. 2300 BC, and came under the rule of the Akkadian Empire, followed by a period of independence as a Hurrian city-state, before contracting at the beginning of the second millennium BC. Nagar prospered again by the 19th century BC, and came under the rule of different regional powers. In c. 1500 BC, Tell Brak was a center of Mitanni before being destroyed by Assyria c. 1300 BC. The city never regained its former importance, remaining as a small settlement, and abandoned at some points of its history, until disappearing from records during the early Abbasid era.¹⁵



Tell Brak, source credit <https://www.tellbrak.mcdonald.cam.ac.uk/>

12 <https://www.asor.org/onetoday/2020/09/oppenheim-tell-halaf>

13 Tell Brak ancient Assyrian name is Nilibshi. See Parpola, Simo and Michael Porter. The Helsinki Atlas of the Near East in the Neo-Assyrian Period. The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001.

14 <https://www.arch.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/archived-projects/tell-brak>

15 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tell_Brak

The above critical examples of excavations in northeast Syria prove clearly that there never was an ancient Kurdish history in the region. The presence of Kurds in northern Mesopotamia (northeast Syria and northern Iraq) is very recent when it comes to the history of the region.

Syrian Assyrian writer Sulaiman Yousif Yousif writes, in 1932, a Kurdish memorandum was presented to the French mandate authorities. The memorandum demanded a Kurdish region under French protection. The memorandum reinforced the well established understanding that falsifying political and historical facts was a normal practice of Kurdish nationalists. Since the failed attempts to establish a “Kurdish state” in 1946 in Mahabad, western Iran, and similar efforts in Turkey, Kurdish nationalists began searching desperately for a foothold somewhere in the political geography of the adjacent regions. Here, they began to infiltrate Syria and Iraq.

The Kurdish memorandum stated, “*We, the inhabitants of the Syria’s al-Jazeera region, from both Muslims and Christians, belong to the Aryan race and to the Kurdish nation.*” This statement contains clear and obvious historical and political inaccuracies. As it is known, the Syrian northeastern Jazeera region is part of northern Mesopotamia - the historical homeland of the Assyrians. The overwhelming majority of the Christians of the Syrian Jazeera are Assyrians, who are Semites and do not belong to the Aryan race. The Assyrians have no ethnic connection with the Kurds and do not belong to a supposed “Kurdish nation”, which never existed in ancient history.

The Kurdish nationalists portray the 1937 events of the town of ‘**Aamuda** as part of the Kurdish national struggle. However, this memorandum, with its separatist Kurdish tendencies and misleading wording, impugns any true national struggle. One wonders, how is it possible to describe those events as national uprising of both Muslims and Christians when its spark began with the Kurdish attack on the Christian neighborhoods in ‘Aamuda and the killing of dozens of defenseless Christians.¹⁶

Finally, a population analysis of the city of **Bet Zalin (Qamishli)** must be considered. Bet Zalin adjoins the Assyrian city of Nisibin on the Turkish side. It was strictly a French garrison in 1920 when Assyrians and other groups began to settle in it. By 1931 census, there were 955 Assyrian families in Qamishli, 650 Armenian families, 250 Jewish families, only a combined 125 Muslim families of Arabs, Kurds and Muhallamis and 20 Yezidi families.¹⁷ How did the Kurds become a majority today?

The deliberate change of ancient Assyrian names of cities, mountains, rivers, the misleading narrative of events and acts of demographic change are unacceptable – these acts are part of cultural genocide. The archaeological sites mentioned earlier and their historic names are the heritage of Syria and the world. Syria must end the process of demographic changes and work diligently and forcefully to preserve and protect the heritage and history of its historic sites.

We read, *Heritage is our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration.*¹⁸

16 <https://mufakerhur.org/%d9%85%d8%b0%d9%83%d8%b1%d8%a9-%d9%83%d8%b1%d8%af%d9%8a%d8%a9-%d8%a5%d9%84%d9%89-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a7%d9%86%d8%aa%d8%af%d8%a7%d8%a8-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%81%d8%b1%d9%86%d8%b3%d9%8a-%d8%aa%d8%b7%d8%a7%d9%84/?fbclid=IwAR2R2NCb84dDI8ivYyqgfFVCrKxPORxIWSiu671kieNQfku5NUV3imcH5JI>

17 In Fred Aprim, *The Betrayal of the Powerless*, Xlibris. 2021. Referencing Mar Ignatius Antoun Hayek - II, *History of the Parish of Nisibin and Hasaka* (reprint, Beirut, 2006)

18 <https://whc.unesco.org/en/about/>