

TAUFIQ WAHBY

THE
ROCK-SCULPTURES IN
GUNDUK CAVE
(in Kurdistan)

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SWEDEN 1983

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GUNDUK

FORWORD

By Seton Lloyd, F. S. A.

A new set of photographs, recording in detail the two groups of sculptured reliefs at Gunduk in North Iraq, were obtained by the Directorate-General of Antiquities in the Autumn of 1947. Prompted by these, H.E. Sayyid Tawfiq Wahbi, has written the following interesting notes on the possible implications of these rock-carvings, whose date and general significance have till now remained enigmatic.

His Excellency, who has for many years shown signs of the most active interest in the social anthropology as well as the antiquities of the northern liwas, has suggested an interpretation of their function and symbolism which will be seen by archaeologists to merit serious consideration. He has in fact associated the purpose of the sculptures with primitive superstition of the kind defined by Sir James Frazer as 'homoeopathic magic,' and has elaborated his contention by the enumeration and description of some pertinent rituals practised by the Kurds of the present day. These in themselves are of great interest, as so little research of an anthropological character has, till now, been achieved among the Kurdish people. Those familiar with the subject will have no difficulty in recognising some old fertility rituals in a new form, while his rain ceremonies make an interesting comparison with that recorded at Khorsabad by Franfort (Iraq Vol. 1 No. 1).

His Excellency's identification of the various figures in the first sculptured group, does not always agree with those of previous visitors to the site, but their state of preservation makes some speculation permissible. As to the dating of the carvings, some caution is necessary in accepting the inference that one of the two groups belongs to a period when agriculture was in its infancy; and one would be more inclined, like Bachmann, to suspect that excavations in the mound adjoining the sculptures would reveal traces of an historic period to which both groups could be more safely attributed.

Seton Lloyd.

THE ROCK-SCULPTURES IN GUNDUK CAVE.

by

H. E. Taufiq Wahby.

In the Autumn of 1947 the Directorate-General of Antiquities inaugurated its winter-season of research by visiting and recording photographically the principal rock-sculptures of North Iraq, including some reliefs never previously studied. Among the monuments are the two interesting groups of carvings near the village of Gunduk in the Aqra district (See map No. 1). It is on the subject of these sculptures and their general implications that I have written the following notes, as a preliminary to their further study.

In the Gunduk cave (Plate 1) there are two groups of bas-reliefs. The first group is on the left of the cave as one approaches, and the second is about seven metres higher, to the right of the first (Plate 2).

Of these two groups, the first, (Plate 3), only, has been observed by the various archaeologists who visited the site in the past.

Sir A.H. Layard who visited the cave in 1850 and published a drawing of the first group of bas-reliefs in his book **Nineveh and Babylon**⁽¹⁾ has the following to say about :

"There are two sculptured tablets (Plate 4) in the rocks Gunduk. They have been carved at the mouth of a spacious natural cavern, whose roof is fretted with stalactites, and down whose sides trickles cool clear water, and hang dank ferns and creeping plants. It is called Guppa d'Mar Yohanna, or the cure of St. John, and near it is an ancient Nestorian church dedicated to Saint Audishio. The bas-reliefs are Assyrian. The upper represents a man slaying a wild goat with a spear. In the lower, as far as I could distinguish the sculpture, which is high on the rock and much injured, are women facing each other, and seated on stools. Each holds a child above a kind of basin or circular vessel, as if in the act of baptizing it. Behind the seated female to the left, a figure bears a third child, and is followed by a woman. On the opposite side is a group of three persons, apparently sacrificing an animal. There are no traces of inscriptions on or near the tablets."

(1) Layard: *Nineveh and Babylon*. P. 368.

Much later, in 1914, W. Bachmann paid a hurried visit to the cave taking a photograph on which he based his description of the first group of bas-reliefs. He also did not notice the second group which we shall describe later. We quote his description in full⁽¹⁾: (Plate 5)

"The relief lies in what is today only a poorly distinguishable frame, nearly square in shape, the sides of which are about 2 metres. It shows two pictures arranged one above the other. In the upper picture is shown a hunter who has just struck down a strong mountain goat. The hunter, whose head has been badly weathered, seems to carry a quiver hung round him from left to right. He wears a short overdress which is held over the hips with a broad, segmented girdle, and which leaves the naked muscleless legs and arms free. The movement of the body is lively, the upper part of the body being shown twisted forward and the feet striding sideways. The right hand has just thrown the short hunting spear, and the right arm is still stretched away from the body. The left arm is raised with a slight bend in order to balance the swing of the throw. Traces of a bow, which was held by the left (sic) hand are vaguely discernible. The whole figure is not awkward, but sketched in broad strokes. Better is the strong goat, which has broken its knees and is dying. The head of the animal carries a strong and bent horn, the throat a tuft of hair, and the eyes are shown too big. The body of the animal like its head is reproduced with very good natural observation.

"In the lower sketch is a complicated group of figures the right of which was lost through faulty photography, but here also, in so far as it can be ascertained with a magnifying glass, it has been very badly weathered.

"The import of the sketch seems to be that the mountain goat killed above, has been offered or at least has been cut up in the tribal (family) circle. The whole, therefore, might be in memory of the hunt.

"Next, on the extreme left two figures can be clearly distinguished walking towards the right. The first, who wears a long shirt reaching to the ankles, holds both arms bent upwards and carries in or on her hands something which is no more distinguishable. It might possibly show a woman. Then comes

(1) Bachmann, *Felsreliefs in Assyrien*, p. 28 et seq.

a man wearing a short dress cut to the hips who brings with his raised arms a bulging jar. He seems to carry a sword hanging on his left side. The middle group shows next two men who are busy cutting up the mountain goat lying on the floor. The one on the left in a half dress holds the animal by its forelegs, the one on the right is bent deeply and seems to wield the butchers-knife. He is hidden up to the middle by the following figure. One gets the impression that he wears on his head a conical cap.

In the proceedings can be seen now a bald and beardless man sitting on a stool, who is wropped in a shawl which ends in a straight line in the upper half of the calves. The head part is here very clearly shown, the round form of the skull and the ear being clearly seen.

"Further to the right comes a figure in a long shirt who raises his arms above the head. It is not clear whether the raised arms carry something. The rest of the picture is not distinguishable.

In order to clarify the origin of the relief, its relationship with the cave is important, because this is at any rate a remarkable natural phenomenon both by its size and by its peculiar shape as a cave of stalactites.

"The present location of the village of Gunduk in a fertile valley rich with water allows us to take for granted without hesitation and without consideration of the mound of ruins that here was from the oldest time a place of habitation which has been utilized as such. We can have an indication as to how far back these habitations go only by excavation.

"It is difficult to ascribe the relief itself to any definite time. The ill-contrived drawing of the lines can as well be ascribed to lack of skill as to their going back to very old age. The relief can undoubtedly be said to be a creation of a settled people and not a victory monument of a conqueror. The meaning of the sketch shows clearly, therefore, a reproduction of a scene from the daily life of a mountain folk, and at most may be understood as an offering scene, in which case the cave would be perhaps a place of worship.

"It can be seen at once that the relief cannot be an Assyrian scene. The figures are all beardless, the skulls show a

shape that is round, and straight, but strong noses. The sparse hair is twisted into braids from the parting line of the hair, when the skull is not, as in the middle figure, entirely bald.

"One is perhaps not wrong in supposing that the forefathers of the present day mountain kurds, the "Kurti" of the Assyrian inscriptions were the executors of these reliefs and that the cave served them as a place of worship. Even today the pure Kurdish tribes of the mountains show a very similar type, bony and sinewy bodies, and round skulls with a sparse hair growth which is twisted into braids. Also the mound of ruins might so clarify itself that we may know from its Assyrian incriptions of the campaigns of the great Assyrian kings against the "Kurti", as well as of their subjugation "

It is to be noted that Layord who visited the cave before the age of photography, based his description on a drawing which he made directly from the reliefs. Bachmann on the other hand, based his description and drawings on a photograph which he magnified with a projector on his return to Germany. His photograph, however, was taken from the right side of the bcs relief, a fact which resulted in hiding the figures on the right side of the relief and gave a somewhat distorted view of the rest of the lower figures. This in turn resulted not only in a somewhat faulty description of the lower group on Bachman's part but, as we believe, made him miss in his interpretation, the whole point of the lower group. Indeed Layard's description, though not entirely satisfactory, is comparatively more correct in our view than that of Bachmann.

The new set of photographs taken by the Iraq Department of Antiquities permits a more careful examination of the nature of the reliefs, and perhaps a more plausible interpretation. In the first group which may be seen in (Plate 3), two separate scenes are depicted, one above the other.

The upper register represents the figure of a hunter, and a wild goat transfixed by a spear. The attitude of the hunter in the upper scene represents the natural posture of a spearman who has just thrown a weapon from his right-hand, and balances his

body with his left. It also gives a recognisable impression of an ibex with its curved horn, beard and other parts in fair proportions. The long spear or javelin is clearly shown thrust between the beast's shoulders. We are unable to find the quiver which Bachmann thought hang around the hunter. Nor do we think like Bachmann, that he carried a bow in his hand. The white traces of what might give the impression of a bow are if anything the results of weathering.

In the lower register a number of figures appear perhaps in the act of preparing and eating the meat of the ibex hunted above. On the right side one observes two persons cutting the quarry into pieces: a man on the right, a woman on the left, and the game in between. Another woman, carrying a tall vessel made of unknown material on her head appears to be bringing the meat to those who are seated in the centre. This central group consists of two figures, a beardless man, seated on the right, and opposite him a woman. Between them, on a rock, which apparently serves as a table, there appears to be a child with its arm extended towards the man's mouth. Between the child and the woman there appear the remnants of a broken figure which might be a piece of the game but is probably another child. The woman's hand is extended as if she were feeding the second child. Behind the woman are two other persons approaching the seated figures. The first is a man carrying a large object, perhaps another child, and the second is a woman again carrying in her arms what might be a baby.

Comparing our account of the content of the bas-reliefs based on the new photographs with that of Bachmann, we arrive at some very definite differences. Bachmann having missed, through his faulty photography, to see the figures on the right cutting up the ibex, thought that this was being done by the central group of figures. The new photograph shows the central group to be a man and a woman seated on stools (the woman on the left is not standing as Bachmann shows her) with two of their children between them as Layard thought, all probably in the act of eating the meat brought from the right side. Further the man to the left of the seated woman seems to be carrying a child and not a jar as Bachmann thought, while it is only logical to suppose that the woman with outstretched arms on the extreme-left is carrying a baby. The whole first group of reliefs, there-

fire, tells a continuous story of a huntsman hunting a mountain goat, of the goat being cut to pieces and brought to the table in the centre around which the whole family assembles. It is apparent therefore that Bachmann missed the whole import of relief, by supposing that the animal was merely being cut up or that an offering was being made of it, thereby supposing the reliefs to be the centre of a cult. Nor do we believe him right in concluding that the scene was carved "in memory" of a hunt. We rather believe it to be, like similar cave paintings and carvings in southern Europe, carvings made for purposes of magic, whereby the huntsman or magician mimics the objects of his desire in order to be the better successful in the hunt and in providing food for the family.

As regards the date of the reliefs, Layard was undoubtedly not right in thinking them to be Assyrian. Bachmann, while denying their being an Assyrian creation, is unwilling to commit himself as to their date beyond hinting that they might be of very remote antiquity.

It can however be asserted that the bas-reliefs give the impression of a milieu in which the art of agriculture was still unknown or at least in its infancy, and domestic animals rare or non-existent. The people who carved the first group of bas-reliefs, therefore, represent an early stage of settlement at or near the cave people who had not yet gone down to the valley to practice agriculture.

According to this theory, the mound near the village of Gunduk would probably belong to a later and more advanced stage of settlement, when the hunting dwellers living at or near the cave came down to the valley and began to live, at least partially at first, on agriculture.

I find it easy to assume that the two scenes just described may be taken as a clue to the mentality of the people living in this region at the time when they were carved. Here, as at all times in his early history, man felt that the satisfaction of his hunger was the foremost of all his necessities, and, living on those natural resources which he could most easily come by, such as herbs, roots, wild cereals, fruits and game, he devised magic and incantations to safeguard their abundance; magic, that is, of the sort in which the magician mimics and portrays the object of his desire, and incantations by which its realisation is invoked.

Examples of such portrayals are still preserved in the form of cave-paintings dating from the palaeolithic era. These magical arts, it was believed, ensured success in hunting, as "like produces like", Primitive men and women would perform ceremonies, sing incantations and dance to the tune of the pipe, before the huntsmen went out to the chase. Man, from prehistoric times till now, has practised this kind of magic, despite the doctrines of religion and the enlightenment of education.

For example, the kurds of to-day, when rain is delayed, not only recite the prayer for rain, which is a purely religious act, but also practise some kinds of magic rituals the root of which is steeped in the remote past.

The religious prayer is called "Nözha Bārāna" (The prayer for rain) which is from Arabic "SALĀT al-ISTISQA' ". This is performed usually outside the towns or villages; and in places where there are dervish quarters, the dervishes, and blackened faced *divānas* (ecstatic dervishes) go to the tomb of a great Pir in the district, and there, after praying the "Nözha Bārāna" they hold a *dhikr* (invocation of God's name) ceremony.

The *divānas* praying for rain with blackened faces is a sign of a confession of sin and shame, since it is believed that the stoppage of rain is God's punishment for man's iniquities.

There are several kinds of magical rites for bringing down rain :

An effigy is made in the form of a wooden cross, the perpendicular axis being longer than the horizontal. This is covered with a cloth, and a turban is placed on the top. It is called "Buka Bārānē " (The effigy of rain). A child holds one end, another the other end. Several other children accompany them shouting :

Hanārān nanārān,

Yā Khwā, dā y kāt a bārān,

Bo faqīr u hazhārān.

which means :

Hanārān manārān,

O God, that rain fall,
For the poor and wretched. (1)

or,

Yā Khwā bārān bibārē

Sargotina i bahārē.

which means :

O God, that rain fall,
The bare-headed of spring.

or, addressing the effigy itself:

Būka Bārānē,

Āw y bindaghlānē,

Sahan i jārānē.

which means :

Effigy of rain,
(we want) Water beneath the crops,
The dish of the past days.

The children go from house to house dipping the effigy in the household water basin, if there is any; or the Lady of the house pours down a pail of water on the effigy. This kind of rite is very popular among the children, because the lady of the house has to give them some sweets as well.

In some places people go to the door of the most notable family and knock; the door will not be opened to them, but water is poured down on them from the top of the house.

In the country the people plunge a well-known pious man in the water basin.

In some places they also take a stone from the tomb of a tested pīr and put it in a water basin. The stone is not removed from the basin and returned to the tomb until rain actually falls.

(1) Hanārān means pomegranates, and manārān is an onomatopoeic variant to rhyme with it.

Even the ladies are not undifferent to such magic. A group of ladies put on their best cloths, and go on a picnic. Taking their provisions and kitchen utensils with them, they go to an old and sacred tree, where they spend their day dancing round the pot while it is cooking. After they take their meal, they pour water on the best dressed women among them, and wait for the rain to fall. If by the time they are ready to go home the rain has not come, they pour water on one another and go home all wet.

In some places, for instance in Kirkuk, the ladies make that picnic in the street, under a spout which is fixed on the edge of a roof. After giving cooked meal to the poor, water is poured down through the spout to wet the ladies in the street.

There are other kinds of rites such as placing a man's skull in the water, burning a dead donkey's head and pouring water on its ashes; and cattle fighting, etc. etc.

In the town of Mosul the children, performing their traditional rites, shout thus :—

Umm al-Ghaith ghīthīna,
 Lola'l-matar mā jīna,
 Huṭṭu l'na bi'l-tabshī,
 Šabbah waladkum yamshī.

which means :

Mother of rain, grant us rain,
 If it were not for rain, we would not come,
 Put it in the vessel for us,
 So that your child may walk.

Thus they beg water, which is poured on the effigy, and some sweets are given to them by the lady of the house.

I wonder, does the lady of the house represent the goddess of fertility or Ishtar and the son of the house, the god of the crop Tammuz, the son of the goddess of fertility.

All these magical baptisms are traditional and have come down from immemorial times. The idea behind them is to wet a man, or somehow representing him so that rain may fall.

Among the Kurds there is also an exactly contrary magic ritual, the idea of which is to stop the rain when its continuation has become injurious. This ritual consists in registering the names of forty scaldheads on a piece of paper which is hung on a tree, such persons being by some obscure symbolism associated with cloudless weather. It is enough sometimes to make a scaldhead stand in the rain.

Concluding our remarks about the two scenes of the first group of carvings we may say that the principal necessity of man was, and still is as already indicated, to satisfy his own hunger, and when that is achieved, reproduction and feeding the family are his primary needs. In the two scenes we have considered both these principal requirements are clearly demonstrated; namely hunting for food and forming and feeding a family. In the upper scene the man is successful in the hunt, and in the lower scene all the members of the formed family group satisfying their hunger.

The carving which we have called the second group (Plate 6) which was not observed by any previous visitors is situated about seven metres away from the group already described. In this there appears a god with two horns, and long hair falling over his shoulders. It seems to me that he has a beard, and that behind him stands an animal, most likely a lion. The god is seated in a chair, wearing a tunic nearly to his feet. His right hand lies on his right knee, and his left hand is raised in front of the face of what might be a wild goat, in the familiar traditional gesture of worship. The wild goat is standing obliquely on its hind legs, and its fore-feet are placed on something hidden beside the god. The head of this wild goat is defaced, but the horn is quite clear. Its left hind leg is also clear and looks like a man's foot. Some lines appear between the god and the goat, branching upwards and sideways. This seems to be a tree. Behind the goat is another smaller animal which also has a horn and may be a young ibex. It is standing upright on its hind legs with its front legs on the back of the other goat. Behind this

young goat there is yet another animal which looks like an ass, feeding its young. And behind this is a man with a cap on his head. It is not clear whether this cap is pointed or whether it has two horns, resembling those of the sitting god. This standing man or god wears a tunic similar to that of the sitting god. I think that in his left hand he is grasping the tail of the female animal and in his right hand a plough. Behind this person there is a crevice in the rock, on the other side of which is another animal which completes the scene. This animal is very much like a lion. On the other side of the ass there are engraved lines which slope upwards and resemble again a leafy tree.

This, I believe, is a spring tableau, later in date than the first group, and represents a more advanced stage in civilization when animals were domesticated and agriculture was practised; when villages were built, and religious creeds established. This relief seems to have provided a background for certain magico-religious ceremonials. The herdsmen and farmers of those days would, perhaps, on special occasions, visit the cave and hold religious celebrations in front of this tableau, clad in sheep and goat skins complete with horns and tails, dancing to the music of the pipe and chanting their incantations. By such ceremonies they would hope to obtain rain, to avoid the severity of winter, to enjoy sunshine, and to ensure that their animals would reproduce and grow, and that their corn would ripen in abundance, and that the trees would blossom and the birds sing.

A parallel for such ceremonials may again be found among the Kurds of the present day. At Sulaimaniyah, for instance, similar rituals are still performed in spring. After preparations by a specially appointed group of persons, on the morning of the appointed day, when all is ready, the people of Sulaimaniyah leave the town and gather in the place of celebration. A king is enthroned, his courtiers and guards are appointed. The king proceeds on an ox, followed by his courtiers amidst the crowd towards the camp where tents are pitched, "diwans" are formed, and cauldrons are set out. Certain individuals masked with sheep and goat skins represent in mime domestic animals throughout the ceremony, which lasts for three whole days.

The chief is implicitly obeyed. He even imposes taxes on persons whether absent or present at the meeting. He continues

to enjoy the title of "Pāshā" until another similar celebration is held.

In my opinion this celebration, which is nowadays considered recreational, is in fact a commemoration of Fraidūn's rebellion against the tyrannical Dragon-King, Dhahāk, in which, as we read in Firdausi's *Shah-nāma*, Fraidūn overthrew Dhahāk and recovered the throne of Iran. Fraidūn led his forces to the attack, mounted on a cow.

King Fraidūn and King Dhahāk in the *Shah-nāma* correspond to the heavenly hero Thraētaona and the heavenly dragon Azhi dahāka of whom we read in the *Avesta*. In the latter, Thraētaona destroys Azhi dāhaka, the enemy of mankind, who wishes to prevent the rain from falling and render the earth void of human life and all living things.

It may be useful to give another similar example of such celebrations held among the Kurds. This is called "Samani Pazān" (the Samani cooking ceremony), which is one form of the well known gardens of Adonis. Grain is grown in flat baskets, and having reached a certain height, is cut on a certain day after the feast of the Naurūz or the day of the sun's entry into Aries. Then it is crushed in a mortar and juice extracted, the residue being usually thrown into a running stream. On the evening of the same day people put the juice into a pot and add a certain amount of flour to it. Then it is cooked over a fire. Each family invites its neighbours and friends to a maulūd, and at night dances are held around the pot. When the water of the mixture has evaporated and the food (which is naturally sweet) is well cooked, the pot is moved to a room where a tray containing a mirror, some *kohl* and *henna* are placed, and the room is closed. People having vows or wishes light candles and stick them round the pot. Nobody is then allowed to enter that room while the ceremony lasts.

At dawn the celebrants enter and uncover the pot, where they profess to detect a hand-print on the food. There is then great rejoicing, for it is believed in Sulaimaniyah that Aisha-u-Fatma has visited them and blessed the celebration, and that

she has left the mark of her hand as a sign of her visit. The sacred sweet thus made is then distributed among other people and families. A number of families sometimes band together to hold the ceremony in the house of one of them.

It is hardly necessary to add that the mirror, **Kohl** and **henna** would seem to indicate that the sacred visitor who is to bless the sweet is a female personage⁽¹⁾. In Iran the lady spirit who visits the *samanū* ceremony is *Fātimat uz-Zahrā*. She leaves her hand print on the *samanū*, or the print of her seal or rosary.

This is not the place for a full interpretation of this ceremony. Suffice it to say that we would not be far in the wrong if we identify the lady spirit with *Anāhīta* of the Iranians and *Ishtar* of the Sumerians and Babylonians. In my opinion, therefore, the ceremony dates back thousands of years, and was held for the purpose of imitating the growth of the corn with the hope of getting better crops by the aid of the deity of fertility. Nowadays it is performed by families who desire to increase, or have a vow to fulfil.

In Iran *Samanū* ceremony is celebrated either on the night between the last day of the outgoing year and the day of the *Naurūz*, or the night between the day after the *Sēzdah-ba-dar* and the following day.

Sēzdah-ba-dar is celebrated on the thirteenth day of the new year. Now number thirteen is unlucky in Iran. When in counting some things related to life and food, they reach number

- (1) In some places the person visiting the cooked sweet is said to be *Khidhr-Elias*, whose feast falls on the eve of the 23rd of April of the Julian calendar, equivalent to the one of the 6th of May of the Gregorian calendar. This is also the feast of Saint-George. The feast of *al-Khidhr* seems to mark the full growth of the grass and the flowering of the trees. The ceremonies of *Khidhr-Elias* are mostly held by those wanting a child, especially a son. Calendars published in Istanbul divide the year into two parts, the days of *al-Khidhr* which extend from the 23rd of April to the 26th of November and the days of *Al-Qasim* which extend from the 26th of November to the 23rd of April of the Julian calendar. The first are days which are full of green vegetation, (*Khadhar*), and the second are days devoid of green vegetation.

thirteen, they say "twelve and one". Even among the Kurds this number in situations related to life and food is regarded as unlucky and is called Ziyāda (increment). This provides us perhaps with an explanation of the idea behind the Sēzdah-ba-dar, which literally means "thirteen out". Early on this day people go out on a picnic in the fields taking their food with them and stay till after sunset. This is just for throwing away the bad luck of the previous year, and getting a fresh good luck for the new year. The women take an herb and knot it invoking Sēzdah-ba-dar saying.

Sabza, Sabzī i tū az man,
zardī i man az tū;
Khūshī i tū az man,
Qahr i man az tū.

which means :

O green, your greenness be mine,
My yellowness be yours;
Your happiness be mine,
My worry be yours.

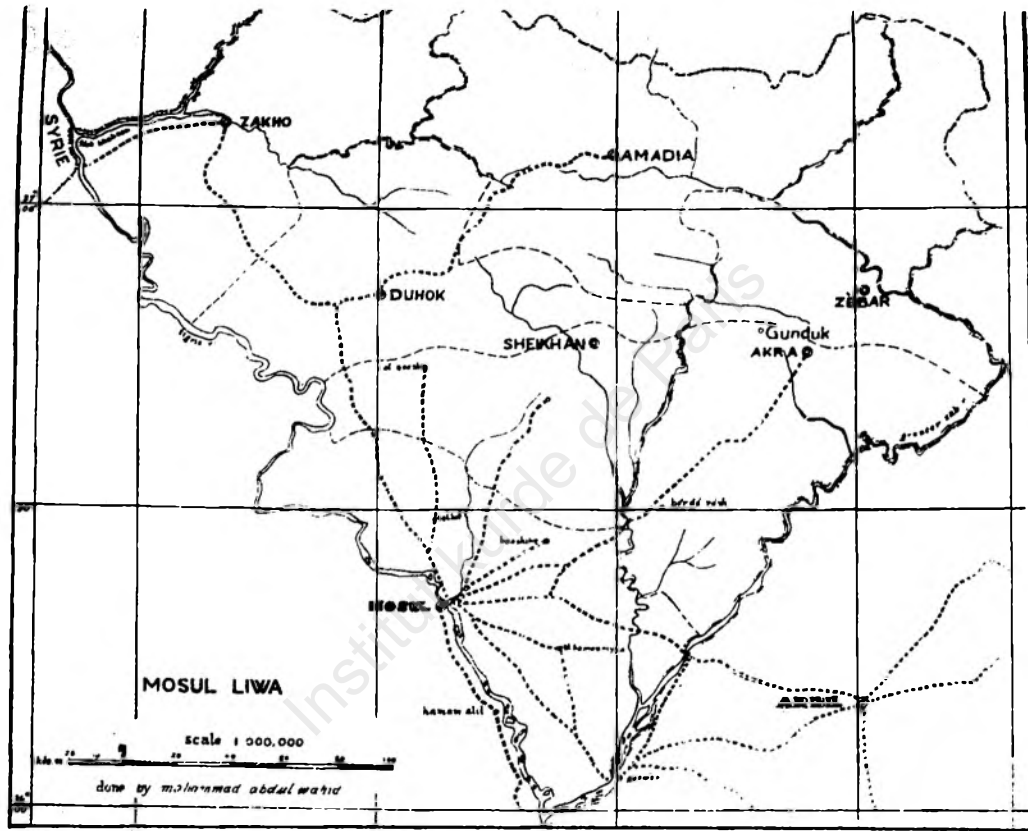
Virgins and young widows invoke Sēzdah-ba-dar saying:

Sēzdah-ba-dar,
Sāl i digar,
Khāna i shau-har,
Bachcha ba baghal.

which means :

O thirteen out!
the coming year,
(In) the home of the husband,
Baby in arms.

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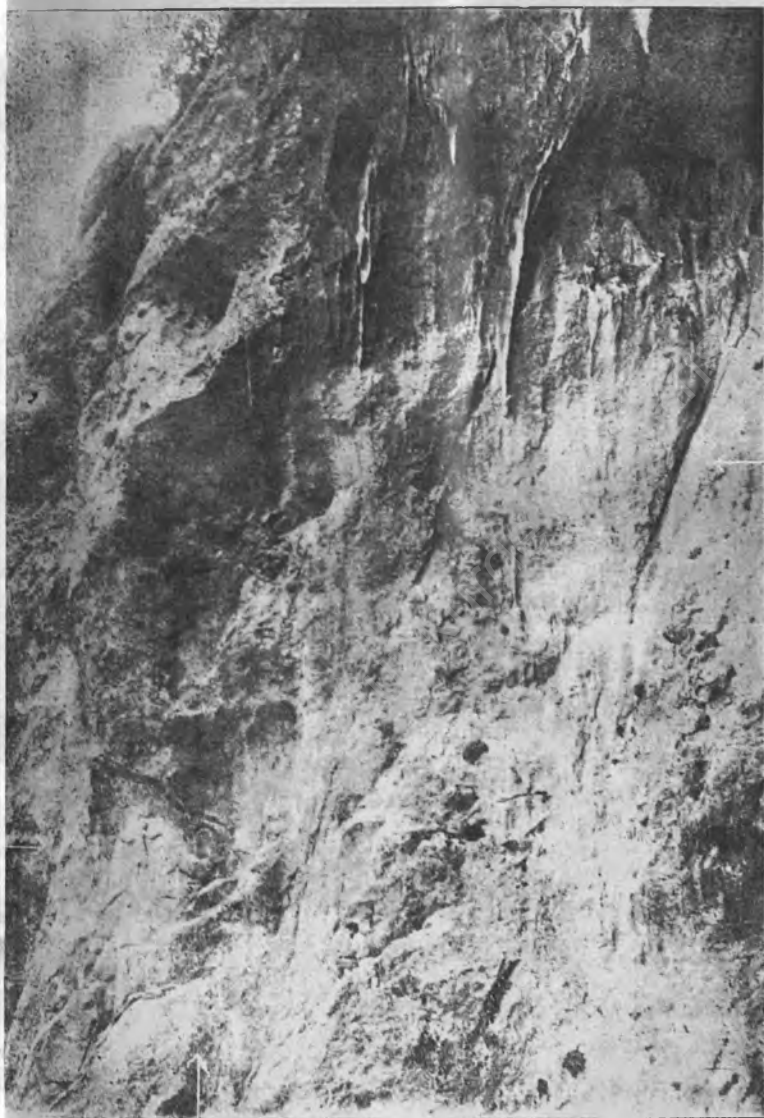


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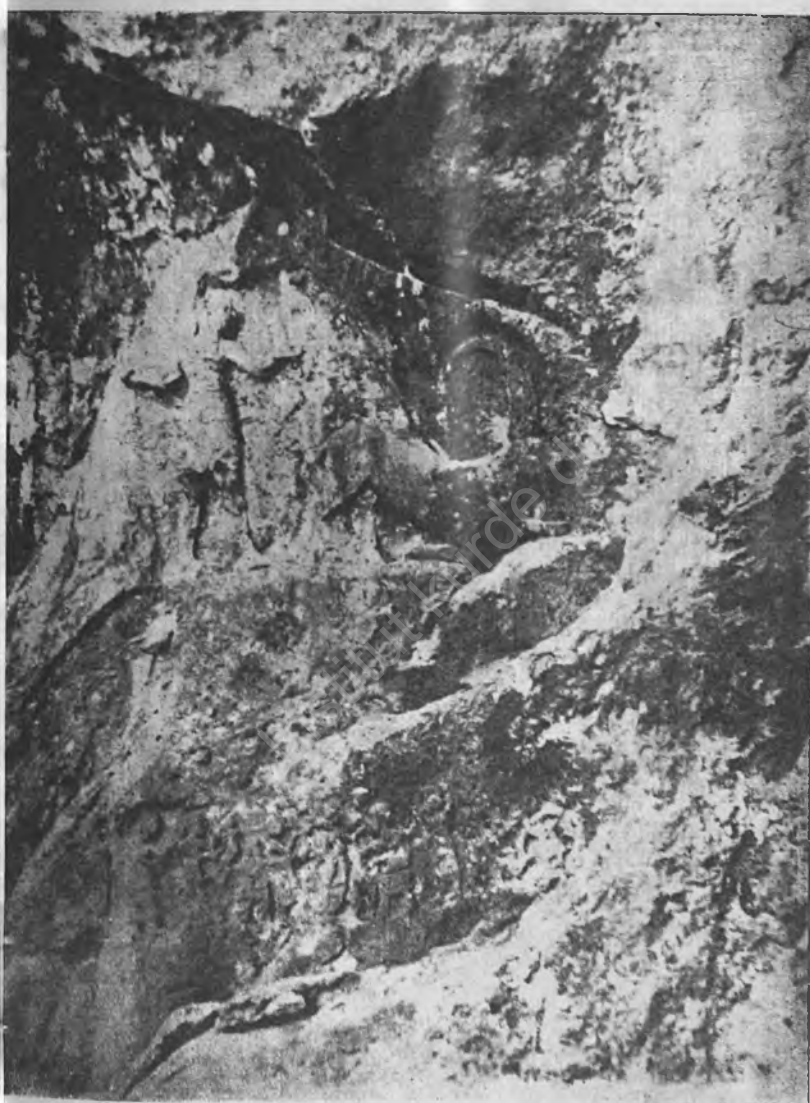


(Plate 1)

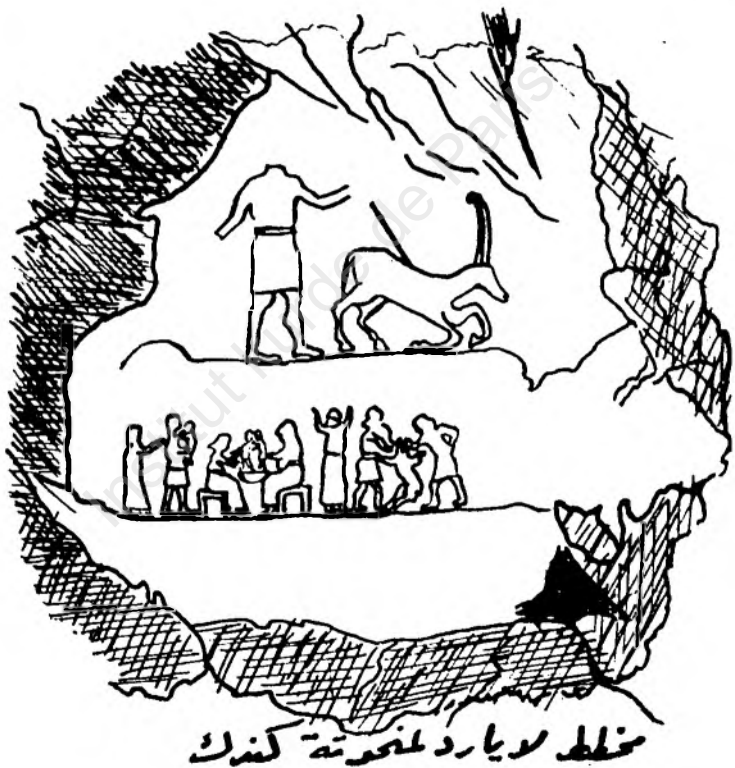
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مخلف لایارد من الحفوة كندك

Die Gunduk - Skizze von Layard (Abzug)

(Plate 4)

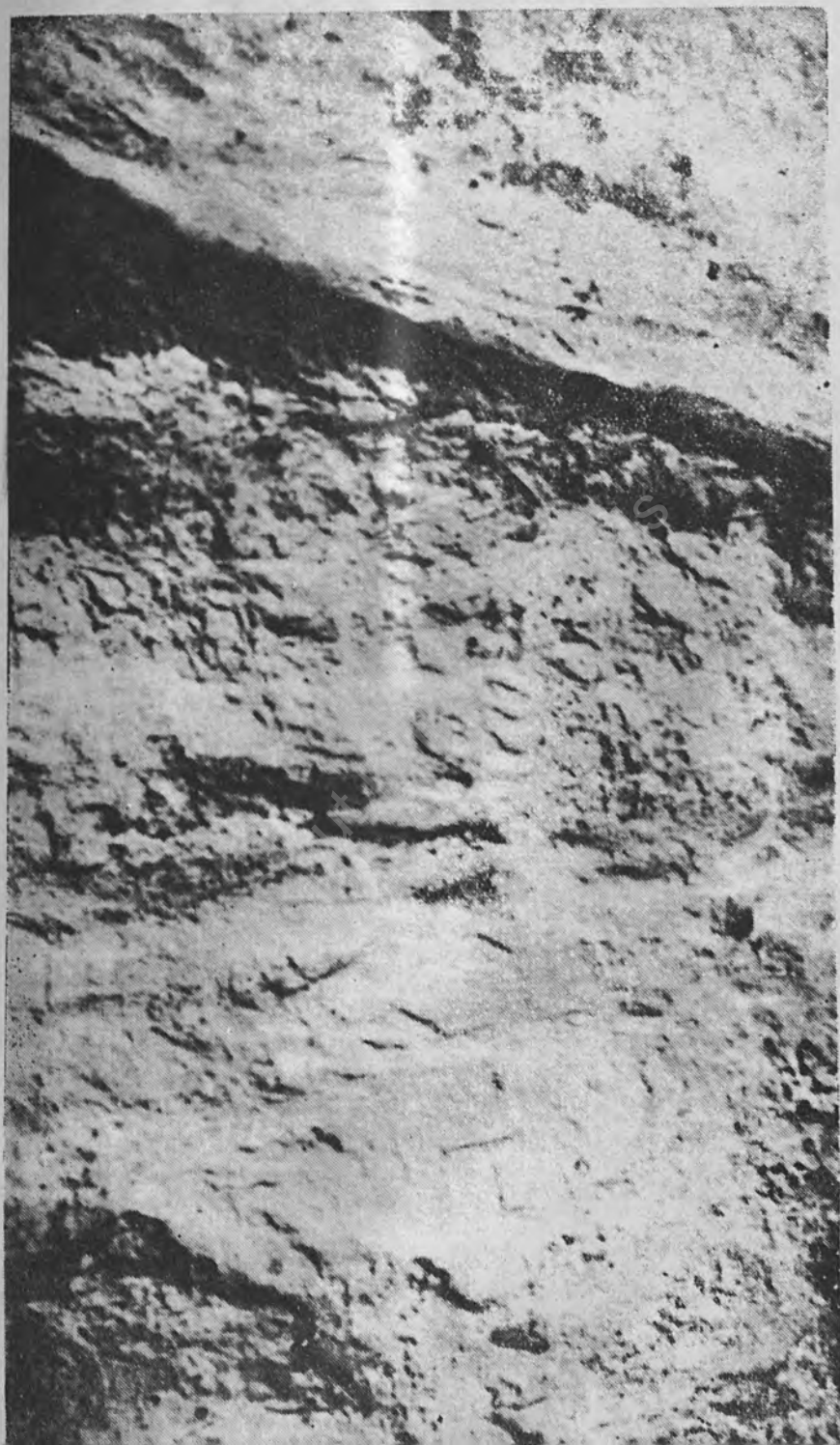
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مخطوط باخمان لمخوة كندك
Die Gundük - Skizze von Bachmann (Abzug)

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