

Religion and Power on The Urartu–Assyria Frontier: A New Perspective on Musasir

Urartu–Asur Sınırında Din ve İktidar: Muşasir Üzerine Yeni Bir Bakış

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Abstract

This study examines the depiction of the plundering of the Muşasir (Uartian Ardini) temple in the Khorsabad reliefs within the framework of Sargon II's (721–705 BCE) Eighth Campaign, conducted in 714 BCE. The Muşasir relief is not merely a visual record of a military expedition but a powerful instrument of Neo-Assyrian royal ideology, embodying the triad of divine sanction, construction, and conquest. Drawing upon the RINAP editions and royal annals, the research reconstructs the campaign route, explores Muşasir's central role within the Haldi cult, and evaluates its influence on the Assyro-Uartian balance of power. The nineteenth-century drawings by Eugène Flandin, which preserved the now-lost reliefs, provide the earliest visual documentation of Uartian sacred architecture and simultaneously illustrate Assyria's ideological supremacy through the integration of text and image. The study also compares differing hypotheses concerning the geographical location and strategic significance of Muşasir, reassessing its dual religious and political character. The findings reveal that the sack of the Haldi temple was a deliberate act of symbolic domination designed to reinforce Assyrian hegemony and legitimize imperial authority. This event demonstrates how religion functioned as a means of political legitimization in the Neo-Assyrian worldview and how sacred spaces were consciously incorporated into imperial discourse. Consequently, the Muşasir relief offers a comprehensive model for understanding the interplay between religion, power, and space along the Assyria–Uartu frontier. It stands as a unique archaeological and ideological document uniting textual, visual, and spatial dimensions of imperial representation. Ultimately, this study provides a critical reference for exploring the role of sacred symbolism in the formation of imperial ideologies throughout the ancient Near East.

Keywords: Muşasir (Ardini); Haldi Temple; Sargon II; Khorsabad Reliefs; Assyria–Uartu Relations

Özet

Bu çalışma, II. Sargon'un (MÖ 721–705) MÖ 714 tarihli Sekizinci Seferi çerçevesinde Muşaşir (Urtuca Ardini) Tapınağı'nın Khorsabad rölyeflerinde betimlenen yağmasını incelemektedir. Muşaşir Kabartması, yalnızca bir askerî seferin görsel kaydı değil, aynı zamanda Asur kraliyet ideolojisinin “tanrısal onay, inşa ve fetih” üçlüsünü somutlaştıran güçlü bir propaganda aracıdır. Araştırma, RINAP edisyonları ve kraliyet yıllıkları temelinde sefer güzergâhını, Muşaşir'in Haldi kültündeki merkezi rolünü ve Urtu–Asur güç dengesi üzerindeki etkilerini ayrıntılı biçimde analiz etmektedir. Eugène Flandin'in 19. yüzyılda gerçekleştirdiği çizimler sayesinde günümüze ulaşan kabartma, Urtu kutsal mimarisinin bilinen en erken görsel betimini sunmakta ve Asur'un ideolojik üstünlük söylemini metin ve imge birlikteliğinde belgelemektedir. Çalışma ayrıca, Muşaşir'in coğrafi konumu ve stratejik önemi konusundaki farklı görüşleri karşılaştırmakta; kentin hem dini hem de politik işlevini çok boyutlu bir yaklaşımla değerlendirmektedir. Bulgular, Haldi Tapınağı'nın yağmasının Asur'un Urtu üzerindeki ideolojik ve sembolik hâkimiyetini pekiştiren planlı bir eylem olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu olay, Asur'un fetih anlayışında dinin meşruiyet aracı olarak nasıl kullanıldığını ve kutsal mekânların politik söyleme nasıl dâhil edildiğini açıkça ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuç olarak Muşaşir Kabartması, Asur–Urtu sınırında din, iktidar ve mekân ilişkilerini açıklayan bütüncül bir model sunmakta; metin, görüntü ve inanç üçlüsünü birleştiren eşsiz bir arkeolojik belge olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Bu yönüyle çalışma, Eski Yakındoğu'da imparatorluk ideolojilerinin oluşumunda dinî sembollerin rolünü anlamak için önemli bir referans noktası oluşturmaktadır.

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Anahtar Kelimeler: Muşaşir (Ardini); Haldi Tapınağı; II. Sargon; Khorsabad Kabartmaları; Asur–Urtu İlişkileri

INTRODUCTION

The Khorsabad relief depicting the Temple of Muşaşir (Urtian *Ardini*) is one of the most significant visual records of Sargon II's (721–705 BCE) Eighth Campaign in 714 BCE. This relief is not merely a visual documentation of a military expedition; it also functions as a powerful instrument of propaganda, reflecting the core principles of Neo-Assyrian royal ideology. The attack directed at the sacred sanctuary of Haldi, the chief god of Urtu, reveals how religion and politics were deeply intertwined in the ancient Near East (Frame, 2014; Radner, 2012). In this sense, the Muşaşir Relief stands not only as a work of art but also as an ideological and political document. The historical and textual background of the relief can be closely traced through the royal inscriptions of Sargon II. *The Royal Inscriptions of Sargon II* published within the RINAP Project (Frame, 2014) provides a detailed account of the campaign route, the reasons behind the military operation against Muşaşir/Ardini, and an extensive inventory of the spoils taken from the Temple of Haldi. The ruler of Muşaşir is identified as King Urzana (Figure 1). According to these texts, Urzana failed to fulfill his obligations of loyalty to Assyria, and the plundering of the Temple of

Haldi is presented as a manifestation of Assyria's concept of "divine justice." In this way, a strong parallel is established between the visual narrative of the relief and the written records.

The discovery and preservation history of the Khorsabad relief is as remarkable as the message it conveys. Most of the reliefs that once adorned the palace walls of Dur-Šarrukin (Khorsabad) were transported to the Louvre in the mid-nineteenth century but were lost in the Tigris River during shipment. The survival of the Mušašir Temple scene is due to the meticulous drawings made in the 1840s by Eugène Flandin, who worked in the region (Botta & Flandin, 1850). Flandin's documentation not only preserves the lost reliefs but also serves as an indispensable visual record for modern research, providing valuable evidence on the façade layout and decorative features of Urtian sacred architecture.

The geographical position and political significance of Mušašir became prominent within the dynamics of the Assyrian–Urtian frontier zone during the final quarter of the eighth century BCE. Radner (2012) analyzes the routes leading to Mušašir in connection with the mountain passes and the lines of retreat of Sargon's Eighth Campaign, integrating textual evidence with geographical data to clarify the role of buffer regions such as Kumme, Ukku, and Subria. This approach transforms the relief from a mere "loot scene" into a tangible manifestation of Assyria's logistical and ideological strategy.

In terms of the continuity of Assyrian royal ideology, the famous "Banquet Stele" of Ashurnasirpal II from Kalhu (Nimrud) provides an important comparative example. This stele, which recounts the inauguration ceremonies of the newly built palace at Kalhu and their presentation within a framework of divine legitimacy, illustrates how Assyrian kings interpreted their construction activities as acts sanctioned by the gods (Coşkun, 2022). This ritual and political background can be directly compared to Sargon II's initiative to establish a new capital at Dur-Šarrukin and his campaign against Mušašir.

All this evidence transforms the Mušašir Relief from a one-dimensional historical record into a complex document of imperial ideology. The written sources—illuminated through Frame's (2014) critical edition and Luckenbill's (1955) compilation—clarify the historical and ideological framework of the campaign, while Flandin's drawings allow for the visual reconstruction of Urtian sacred architecture. Radner's (2012) geographical analysis reveals the military and political balance along the Assyrian–Urtian frontier. Taken together, this multifaceted body of evidence redefines the Mušašir Relief not merely as a work of art but as a key testimony to the Assyrian imperial worldview, in which text, space, and image function as a unified ideological medium.

1. DUR-ŠARRUKIN (KHORSABAD): FOUNDATION AND DISCOVERY

The construction of an Assyrian city on an uninhabited site is an exceptional event in ancient history. For instance, Kalhu (Nimrud) was founded by Shalmaneser I (1274–1245 BCE), later abandoned, and then rebuilt by Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1972, 1976; Grayson, 653, 671, 677–679, 689). Similarly, Tukulti-Ninurta I (1240–1208 BCE) established a new city north of Aššur, naming it Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta. Sargon II, however, adopted a markedly different approach by founding an entirely new capital in an unoccupied area, which he named Dur-Šarrukin, meaning "Fortress of Sargon" (Luckenbill, 1955, p. 119).

From this perspective, Ashurnasirpal II's famous Banquet Stele from Nimrud offers an early example of Assyrian royal ideology and provides a valuable point of comparison for understanding the foundation of Dur-Šarrukin. The stele recounts a grand banquet held to celebrate the inauguration of the newly built palace at Kalhu. This text not only sheds light on the diplomatic relations and ceremonial details of the period but also suggests that Assyrian kings transformed their building activities into acts of power display (Coşkun, 2022). Sargon II's establishment of a new capital at Dur-Šarrukin may likewise have stemmed from a similar desire—to manifest royal authority before his people and neighboring states. Thus, the Banquet Stele of Nimrud should be regarded not merely as a record of festivity but as a sophisticated piece of royal propaganda.

The process of founding the city is described in detail in the inscriptions. The decision was first made with divine approval (Luckenbill, 1955, pp. 78, 83). A site north of Nineveh was then selected, and canals were excavated (Luckenbill, 1955, p. 119). Subsequently, the land was leveled, the labor force was organized, and the foundation platform was laid in 717 BCE (Hayim & Tadmor, 1958, p. 94). Temples and palaces were constructed, relief-decorated stones were set in place, and sacred trees were planted. Finally, the gods were transferred to their new temples, sacrifices were performed, and a great feast was held (707–706 BCE). Each of these steps formed part of Sargon II's broader strategy to consolidate Assyrian power in the Near East and to incorporate conquered peoples into the imperial system (Luckenbill, 1955, p. 105; Tadmor, 1958, p. 97). During this process, high-ranking officials such as Tab-šar-Aššur (architect and treasurer), Nabu-šallim-šunu (royal scribe), and Sin-ahusur (vizier and the king's brother) played crucial roles (Kinnier, 1972). However, Sargon was killed in battle in 705 BCE, and the city was abandoned before completion. His successor, Sennacherib (704–681 BCE), transferred the capital to Nineveh.

2. DISCOVERY OF KHORSABAD

Dur-Šarrukin (Khorsabad) was founded on the banks of the Khosr River, a tributary of the Tigris, covering an area of approximately 3,000 dunams with a square layout, while its citadel occupied around 250 dunams (Rich, 1836, p. 32; Thompson, 1934, p. 95). However, the city's existence was limited to the reign of its founder, Sargon II, and it was abandoned shortly after his death (Livingstone, 1989, pp. 77–79; Tadmor, 1989, p. 11).

The city was discovered during one of the earliest archaeological excavations in Mesopotamia in the modern sense. In 1842, Paul-Émile Botta was appointed as French consul in Mosul and, encouraged by Jules Mohl, began his initial investigations at the mounds of Kuyunjik and Nebi Yunus. Guided by local reports, he initiated excavations at Khorsabad in 1843 (McGovern & McGovern, 1986, pp. 111–112; Larsen, 1996, pp. 21–24). Within a short period, numerous reliefs and inscriptions were unearthed, and the artist Eugène Flandin later joined the expedition to produce meticulous visual documentation of the findings (Botta & Flandin, 1850, p. 5; Bonomi, 1857, p. 12).

The reliefs uncovered during the excavations at Khorsabad depicted Sargon II's renowned Eighth Campaign and, in particular, the plundering of the Temple of Haldi at Mušašir. However, most of these works were lost in the Tigris River while being transported to the Louvre, and only a small portion reached Paris (Figure 1). Despite this loss, Flandin's drawings have preserved the first and only known visual representation of the temple dedicated to Haldi, the chief deity of Urartu (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Fragment from the relief depicting the plunder of the Temple of Mušašir (Louvre Museum, AO 19873; Albenda, 1986).

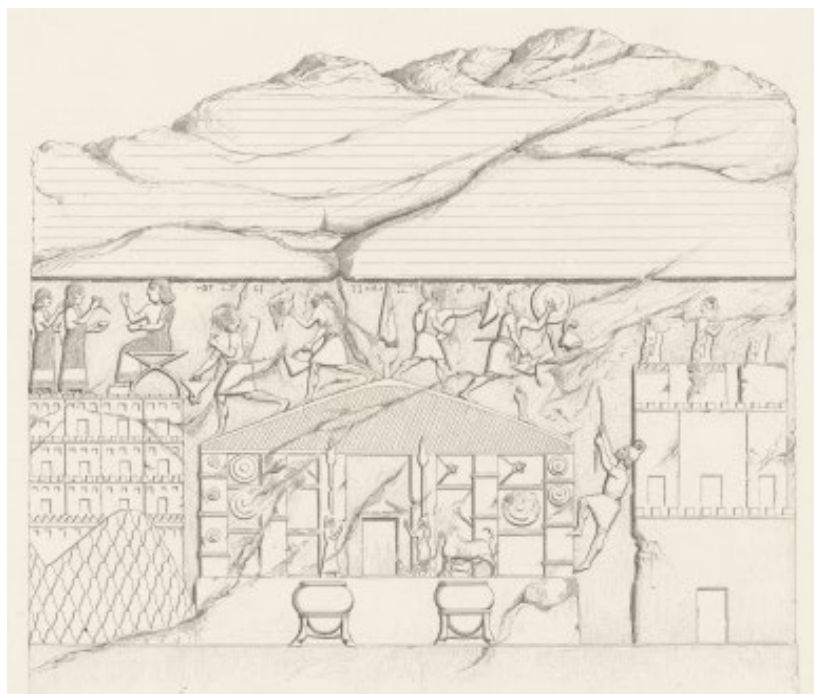


Figure 2. Drawing of a relief that was lost during transport from Khorsabad (Botta & Flandin, 1849, p. 141).

3. THE GEOGRAPHICAL AND POLITICAL POSITION OF MUŠAŠİR

In the Assyrian texts, the city is referred to as Mušašir, while in Urartian inscriptions it appears as Ardini. It likely came under the control of the Urartian Kingdom during the reign of Išpuini (825–810 BCE) (Salvini, 1995). The geographical location of Mušašir has been a subject of intense debate since the late nineteenth century. Çilingiroğlu (2004) proposed that the city should be sought in the vicinity of the Kelišin inscription, whereas the generally accepted view places it south of the point where the modern borders of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq converge, in the region of Rawanduz (Radner, 2012; Salvini, 1995). On the Turkish side, this corresponds to the Hakkâri–Yüksekova area.

For both the Assyrian and Urartian kingdoms, Mušašir held not only religious but also economic and strategic importance. Situated at the crossroads of major trade routes extending from India and Afghanistan through northwestern Iran, the city must have played a key role in regional commerce (Kroll, 2012). Furthermore, the presence of deposits of gold, silver, lead, copper, iron, sulfur, and arsenic in the surrounding area enhanced Mušašir's geopolitical significance.

One of the most significant documents demonstrating the strength of the Haldi cult in this strategic center is the Kelišin inscription, which contains the following passage:

"...When Išpuini, son of Sarduri—the great king, the mighty king, king of the land of Šurili, king of the land of Bianili, and hero of the city of Tušpa—and Minua, son of Išpuini, came to the city of Ardini, before the presence of the god Haldi, they built a temple and erected a stele to the god Haldi. Before the temple, Išpuini, son of Sarduri, offered flawless spears, presented fine cattle, ... offered bronze vessels, ... and dedicated them to the god Haldi..." (Salvini, 1995, p. 47) (Figure 3).

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Figure 3. The Sargon tablet housed in the Louvre Museum (British Museum, K.1675; Frame, 2014).

This inscription clearly demonstrates the central role of Mušašir in the cult of Haldi and its religious significance for the Urartian kings. There are differing opinions regarding the city's precise location. Salvini (1995), Van Loon (1966), and Kravitz (1980) propose that Mušašir can be identified with the modern village of Mudjesir in the Rawanduz region, within the present borders of Iraq, whereas Çilingiroğlu (2004) associates the city with the site of the Kelišin Monument.

Radner (2012) suggests that the available archaeological and historical–geographical evidence may be linked to Sargon II's campaign and the potential destruction that followed. She notes that modern surveys and excavations conducted around the Rowanduz/Topzawa area may provide clues concerning Mušašir. The traces of burning and destruction layers identified in these areas could correspond to the devastation caused by Sargon's expedition. Within this framework, Radner argues that Mušašir should be regarded as a significant religious and political center situated along the Urartian–Assyrian frontier and that its location was most likely near Topzawa (Radner, 2012). Findings from our surface surveys suggest that Mušašir may have been located within the present borders of Turkey, in the Deraw region of Yüksekova district, Hakkâri. The area's position at the intersection of key transportation routes, combined with its strategic suitability for control by the Urartian Kingdom, strengthens the likelihood that Mušašir was situated in Yüksekova.

Salvini (1995) notes that the Urartians likely avoided the rugged terrain where the modern borders of Iraq, Turkey, and Iran meet when traveling to Mušašir. Instead, he argues that Sargon II's campaign followed a route passing through Erçek, Kotur, Urmia, Usnaviyeh, and Kelišin. The same scholar emphasizes that, by the late ninth century BCE, the Salmas Plain lay within Urartian territory, whereas the area between the Hakkâri Mountains and the Greater Zab River belonged to Hubushkia. In Sargon's campaign narrative, the separate mention of the Greater and Lesser Zab rivers, the reference to the peoples of Nairi and Habhi as "Elamunia," and the emphasis on crossing difficult mountain passes all underscore the importance of the Hakkâri region (Radner, 2012; Tanyürek, 2019).

Sargon's campaign records express this event as follows:

"By the supreme might of my god Aššur, by the power of my helpers Bēl and Nabû, and by the sign of Šamaš that spread its protective shadow over my army, I set out on campaign. I conquered the lands of Urartu, Zikirtu, and Mannai; I advanced toward Nairi and Mušašir, raging like a mad dog, finding no rival to withstand me. I defeated in open battle the armies of Ursa, king of Urartu, and Metatti of Zikirtu. I captured all seven provinces and 430 cities of Ursa's realm and laid waste to his land..."

(Frame, 2014, p. 152).

Urartian sources also emphasize the significance of Mušašir. Inscriptions erected by Rusa I before 714 BCE describe the city as the sacred abode of Haldi and as a focal point of the Urartian–Assyrian conflict (Salvini, 1995). These accounts demonstrate that Mušašir held not only strategic importance but also a central religious and cultural role within the Urartian realm.

In political terms, Mušašir functioned as a sacred center for both Urartu and Assyria due to its religious significance and wealth of sacred treasures. The letters sent by Urzana, the ruler of Mušašir, to the Assyrian king before Sargon II's campaign reveal that the city pursued a policy of balance between the two great powers (Radner, 2012) (Figure 4). However, the plundering of the temple in 714 BCE brought this balance to an end. The symbolic depictions on Urzana's seals highlight the city's fragile political position between the rival kingdoms (Kroll, 2012).



Figure 4. Cylinder seal impression belonging to Urzana (Radner, 2012, Fig. 17.02).

Although the region's harsh geographical conditions made Mušašir a difficult target for Assyrian conquest, Sargon II's campaign granted Assyria a decisive advantage at a time when Urartu had been weakened by Cimmerian incursions from the north (Radner, 2012). In this context, Mušašir emerged not only as a religious center but also as a key political focal point in the ongoing struggle between Assyria and Urartu.

4. THE PLUNDER OF THE HALDI TEMPLE AT MUŠAŠİR

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King Sargon II marched on Mušašir and plundered the Temple of Haldi. His own royal inscriptions (*annals*) clearly explain the justification for this campaign: the texts accuse Urzana, king of Mušašir, of failing to fulfill his obligations of loyalty toward Assyria, of defying the gods Aššur, Nabû, and Marduk, and of neglecting his duties in the rituals of tribute and allegiance. This alleged act of treachery served to legitimize Sargon's punishment of the temple (Frame, 2021; Frame, 2014).

The inscription provides a highly detailed inventory of the spoils taken from the Temple of Haldi—listing gold, silver, bronze, precious stones, ivory, rare woodwork, and diplomatic gifts originating from various regions and kingdoms. This extensive inventory demonstrates that Mušašir was not merely a local sanctuary but a cultic center closely connected to diplomacy and trade (Frame, 2014). The offerings dedicated to Haldi and the gifts brought from abroad reveal the economic motivations behind the seizure of the temple.

Within the framework of Assyrian propaganda, the plundering of temples functioned as both a material act of looting and a political statement. The destruction of the Haldi Temple was presented as a demonstration of Assyrian supremacy and as an assertion of power against the national god of Urartu. Thus, Sargon's action can be interpreted as both a military and a religious victory. This strategy not only reinforced Assyrian authority but also inflicted significant damage on Urartu's religious and social structures. The prominence given to this victory in Assyrian palace reliefs further indicates that it continued to serve as an important instrument of imperial propaganda (Figure 5).

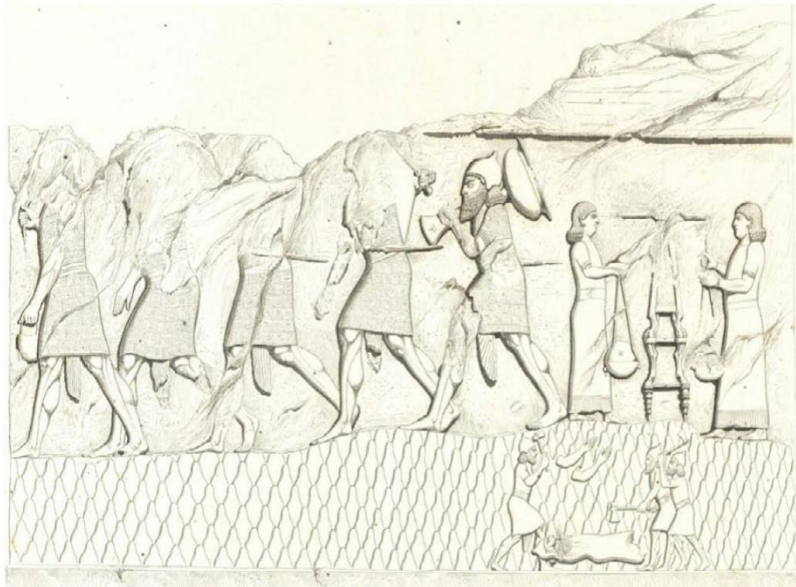


Figure 5. Assyrian soldiers plundering the Temple of Haldi at Mušašir during Sargon II's 714 BCE campaign (Botta & Flandin, 1849, p. 14).

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the Khorsabad reliefs depicting the plundering of the Temple of Mušašir (Ardini) during Sargon II's Eighth Campaign in 714 BCE, analyzing them within the broader political and religious context of the period.

The Mušašir Relief was not merely a work of art but served as one of the principal instruments of Assyrian royal propaganda. The campaign, described in great detail within Sargon II's royal inscriptions, is visually staged in the relief as a representation of triumph. The plundering of the temple dedicated to Haldi, the supreme god of the Urartian Kingdom, was likely intended to demonstrate the superiority of the Assyrian religion and monarchy. This act, therefore, symbolized not only military success but also the establishment of Assyrian political and religious dominance in the region.

The selection of Mušašir as a target was closely linked to this political perspective. As one of the principal sanctuaries dedicated to Haldi, the national god of Urartu, the city held not only religious but also strategic and economic significance. Its position along major trade routes connecting the Iranian Plateau with northern Mesopotamia, coupled with its rich natural resources, further strengthened its importance. The detailed accounts of Sargon's campaign route and the army's advance, as recorded in his inscriptions, demonstrate that this strategic choice was not accidental but rather reflected Assyria's deliberate intention to reshape the balance of power in the region.

The data obtained from our surface surveys in the region adds a new dimension to the ongoing discussions regarding the possible location of Mušašir. These findings support the view that the city may have been situated within modern Turkish territory, specifically in the Deraw region of Hakkâri Province, near the district of Yüksekova. This assessment emerges from the integration of field observations with topographic and stratigraphic analyses. Consequently, the Deraw area stands out as one of the most plausible hypotheses concerning the geographical location of Mušašir.

The relief itself was documented during the mid-19th-century excavations led by Paul-Émile Botta and Eugène Flandin. Although the original monument is now largely lost, Flandin's meticulous drawings remain crucial for understanding both the Assyrian palace relief tradition and the sacred architecture of Urartu. When examined alongside the textual records, this visual material reveals that the plundering of Haldi's temple symbolized a key moment in Assyrian imperial propaganda as well as a turning point in the religious life of Urartu.

In conclusion, the Mušašir Relief documents one of the turning points in Assyrian–Urartian relations and demonstrates the deep interconnection between religion and politics in the ancient Near East. Sargon's campaign was not merely a military victory but also an assertion of political, economic, and religious dominance in the region. The capture of this richly endowed temple dedicated to the god Haldi may have shaken the Urartian people's faith in their divine protector, while simultaneously granting Assyria a psychological advantage over its northern rival.

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