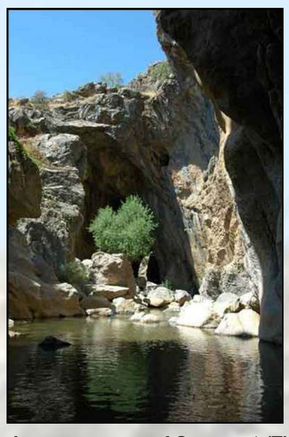
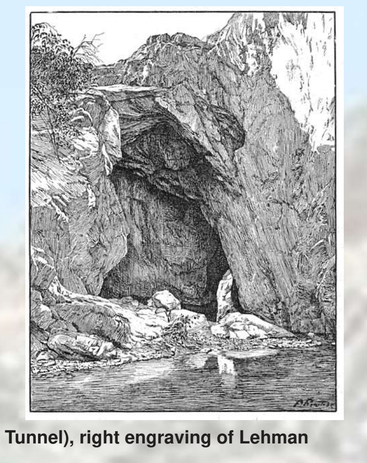
OLDEST DOCUMENTED CAVES OF THE WORLD: BIRKLEYN CAVES

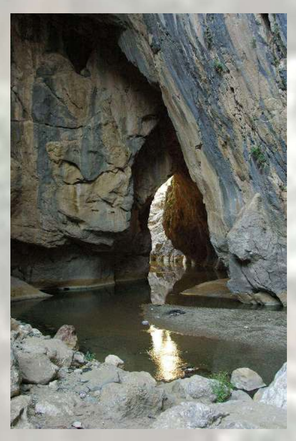
Ali Yamaç

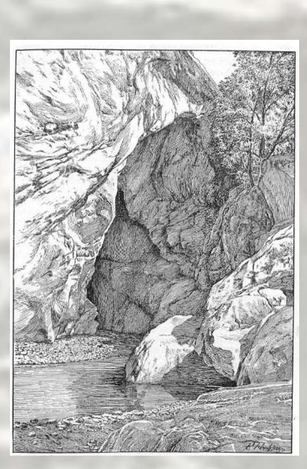
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info@obruk.org





Lower entrance of Cave no 1 (Tigris Tunnel), right engraving of Lehman





Upper entrance of Cave no 1 (Tigris Tunnel), right engraving of Lehman



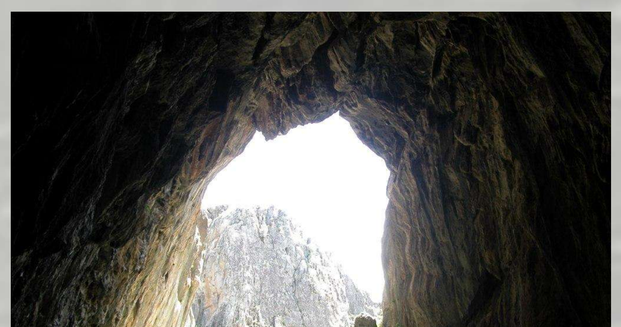
Outflow of Birkleyn River after Cave no 1



Lower entrance of Birkleyn Cave no 1



Cave no 2 (on the left) and Cave no 3



Cave no 1 (Tigris Tunnel)

Abstract

Birkleyn Caves are in Lice, 25 km north of Diyarbakýr, southeastern Turkey. Three of those four caves, which were very near to each other are dry. But the longest and the most important of them, which is known as "Iskender-i Birkleyn" among locals, is a long, travers cave with a branch of Tigris River flowing inside.

These caves are probably the most interesting cave system with 3.000 years old Assyrian inscriptions and reliefs engraved on the walls, within their historical importance and the geological formation. When the former stream bed of Birkleyn River, which the caves are named after, is blocked with a subsidence in the prehistoric times, the river opened a new bed to itself in the with physical erosion inside a nummulitic Quaternary limestone at a close distance to the south and the cave in which Birkleyn River, a branch of Tigris is flowing today was formed.

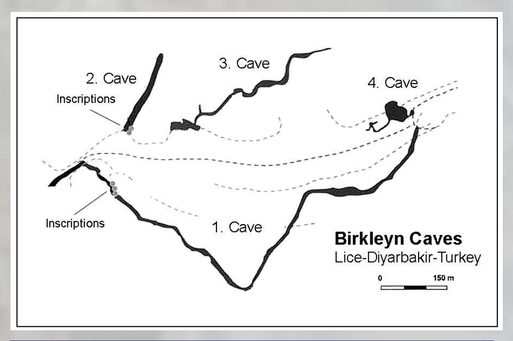
Location of Birkleyn Caves

Birkleyn Caves was first examined by Taylor in 1862. After Taylor, Lehmann-Haupt made short studies in the caves during 1899. After a long silence; Anthony C Waltham visited the region in 1974 and in 1977 members of Speleo Club de Paris mapped three of these caves. In 2007, Andreas Schachner from German Archaeological Institute began to study the Birkleyn caves.

The best known one of those caves; "Iskender-i Birkleyn" has a total length of 870 meters and its a traverse cave. This cave was thought to be the spring of Tigris because of its interesting geographical position. Most probably for this reason; Assyrian kings Tiglath-Pileser I and Shalmaneser III had reliefs and inscriptions made here. Likewise, same cave was depicted as the "Tigris Source" in the bronze ornaments at the gates of Balawat City, which is now in Iraq, that were made under Shalmaneser III. Those bronze reliefs, which dates back to 850 BC is displayed in British Museum today and it is most probably the oldest picture in the world that depicts a cave.

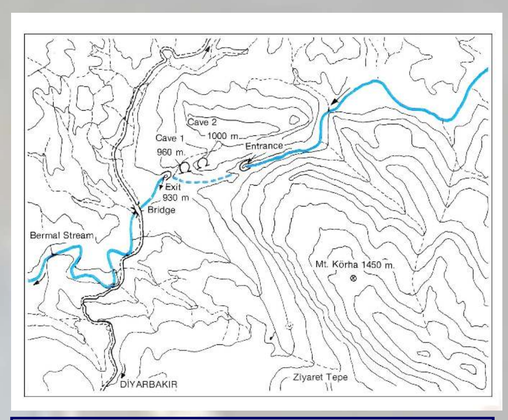
Introduction

Performative engagements with specific, culturally significant places were among the primary means of configuring landscapes in the ancient world. Ancient states often appropriated symbolic or ritual landscapes through commemorative ceremonies and building operations. These commemorative sites became event-places where state spectacles encountered and merged with local cult practices. The Early Iron Age inscriptions and reliefs carved on the cave walls of Birkleyn caves in Eastern Turkey, known as the 'Source of Tigris' in monuments, present a compelling paradigm for such spatial practices.



Map of Birkleyn Caves (after Schachner A, 2004)

Assyrian kings Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076 BC) and Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC) carved 'images of kingship' and accompanying royal inscriptions at this impressive site in a remote region. This important commemorative event was also represented in detail on Shalmaneser III's bronze bands at Tell Balawat, as well as in his annalistic texts, rearticulating the performance of the place on public monuments in Assyrian urban contexts. Those bronze ornaments from the gates of Balawat - Iraq which were dated 850 BC is in display British Museum today and most probably the oldest pictures



Map of Birkleyn Caves (after Schachner A, 2004)

in the world that depicts a cave. It is clear that the "Tigris Source" must have ranked high as a sanctuary not just in local but also in international esteem. Shalmaneser III deemed a visit to this cave was so important that in 852 BC he had his army take a detour on its march back from inner Anatolia to Assyria; he and his predecessor Tiglatpileser I performed sacrifices at the "Tigris Source" and both left inscriptions and reliefs at the site. Moreover, as a holy precinct in open nature, with unlimited water and shelter from the powers of nature offered by three caves in addition to the river grotto itself, the "Tigris Source" would seem uniquely qualified to serve as a refuge sanctuary.



Balawat door bands, showing sacrifices and Birkleyn Cave at upper band, right corner. British Museum.

Caves of Birkleyn in General

Cave no. 1

As the most important one of the four known caves in the region and which is also called "Tigris Tunnel", this cave is located underneath of the bluff at the south that forms the westward expansion of Mount Kohra and has a northeast-southwest direction. The cave has a total length of 870 meters and the average height is 20-25 meters. At the entrance of the cave, 4-5 meters over the floor there are 3 cuneiform scripts. The westernmost one is the inscription and relief of Tiglath-Pileser. 1,5 meters away from that inscription there is Shalmaneser III's inscription and relief, and another inscription of the same king 10 meters away.



The Inscription and relief of Tiglath-Pileser I in Cave no 1

The Inscription of Tiglath-Pileser I (1114-1076 BC):

With the supports of my lords, the great gods Ashur, Samas (and) Adad, I, Tukult?-apil-Ešarra (Tiglath-Pileser I), the son of Ashur-resh-ishi, the king of Assyria who is the son of Mutakkil-Nusku, the king of Assyria, the conqueror of the great sea of Amurru Land (=Mediterranean Sea) and the great sea of Nairi Land (=Lake Van), have been to the Nairi Land three times.

The inscription of Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC):

Šulm?nu-ašar?du (Shalmaneser III), great king, strong king, the king of four realms, the king of Assyria, the king of all humanity, with the support of his guides, the great gods Samas and Adad, the mighty one (king) proceeds with power. They (the gods) gave him (the king) the mountains from the place the sun rises to the place the sun sets.

A king that never stops to follow his enemies and like the hills that flood devastated, strides the impassable rivers and mountains, a brave, merciless king. Son of Aššur-n??ir-apli (=Ashurnasirpal II) who is the son of Tukulti-Ninurta II, the king of Assyria, the conqueror ruler from the sea of the land of Nairi (=Lake Van) to the great sea where the sun sets (=Mediterranean Sea).

I have taken the land of Hatti and all their borders, the land of Melindu, the land of Daianu, the land of Suhmu, the city of Arsaskun, the crown city of Urartus, Aramu, the land of Gilzanu, the land of Hubuskia-(the region) from the spring of Tigris to the spring of Euphrates, (the region) from the sea within the borders of Mazamua (=Caspian Sea) to the sea of the land of Kaldu (=Persian Gulf) under my feet. I went to Babylon and made a sacrifice. I went to the land of Kaldu, took their cities under my rule and accepted their tributes and gifts.

Adda-idri of Damascus and Irhulenu of Hamat revolted with fifteen cities. I fought with them four times.

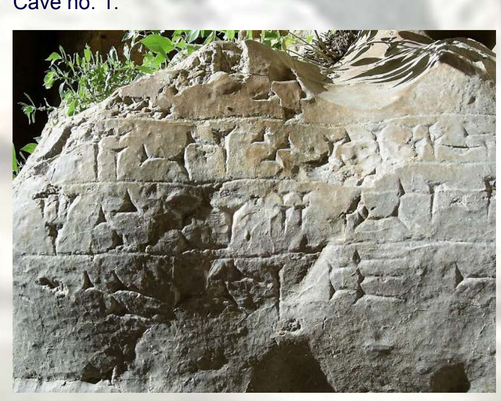
The second inscription of Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC):

Šulm?nu-ašar?du (Shalmaneser III), son of Aššur-n??ir-apli (=Ashurnasirpal II) who is the son of Tukulti-Ninurta II, the king of Assyria, the conqueror ruler from the sea of the land of Nairi (=Lake Van) to the great sea where the sun sets (=Mediterranean Sea). I have conquered the land of Hatti completely. I entered the Enzu Crossing. I conquered the lands of Suhmu, Daianu (and) Urartu completely. I went to the land of Gilzanu. I accepted the tributes of the people of Gilzanu. I went to the land of Nairi for three times. I wrote my name to the spring of Tigris.

Cave no. 2

This cave lies in the outcrop and has a direction of northeast-southwest like the others. It has a length of 150 meters, an average width of 25 meters and a height of 20 meters. Its been used from the prehistoric times to the Medieval era. Besides, both inside and outside the cave, dense traces of many illegal excavations can be found.

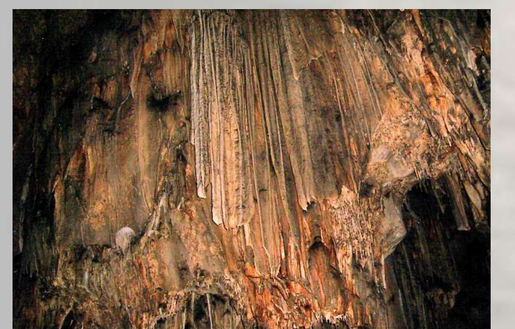
In front of the cave, there is a rock mass resembling a huge platform. The east side of this natural conglomeration, at the crossing point of the cave that ranging putside and the wall, there are two more inscriptions and another relief that belong to Shalmaneser III. The contents of this inscription, which dates back to 858-824 BC, are almost the same with the inscriptions of the same king in the entrance of Cave no. 1.



The Inscription of Shalmaneser III in front of Cave no 2

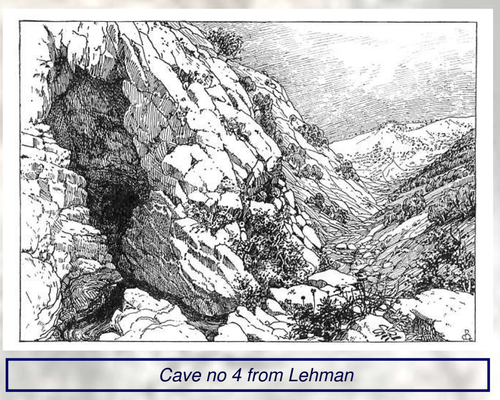
Cave no. 3

With a total length of 600 meters, this cave is located in a distance of 200 meters to the Cave no. 2 and has two parts. After a large entrance and two large spaces between small clearences and bluffs that expands to the canyon, the visitors enter the interior of the cave with a narrow corridor. The whole cave is covered with stalactites and stalagmites and with the ceramics that are found everywhere in the cave suggest that the cave had been used densely.



Cave no. 4

Located over the Cave no. 1's entrance, at the bluffs at the north, this cave consists of two successive spaces. As the majority of the ceiling of the main chamber, which is larger compared to the entrance, which had collapsed, only possible estimation of the original size is a sketchy one. In the light of the discoveries of archeologists, it is seen that these two spaces were used for ages and densely by humans. On the floor of this cave, several terracota fragments were found mostly belonging Iron Age.



Cave no 4 from Lehman

Conclusion

Though its been a politically problematic region of Turkey for a long time; we believe that culture, history and natural beauties are the assets of all mankind. In the light of all the informations above, it is evident that Birkleyn caves have a great natural and historical importance and those lonely natural values in a troubled land have to be taken under protection without wasting any more time.

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