

## World

# Iraq's ancient frieze survives war and Isis to reveal its gods

## Iraq

Richard Spencer  
Middle East Correspondent

The giant friezes of the biblical King Sennacherib carved into the sides of a canal in northern Iraq have taken 50 years to reveal. But it has been a disruptive 50 years of invasion, civil war and insurgencies.

In 2014 the fighters of Islamic State came within 15 miles of excavations on the canal. These restarted in 2019 only to pause again for the pandemic.

Now the canal, part of the greatest man-made water management system of the ancient world, has been uncovered. At its heart are reliefs cut into the mountainside showing Sennacherib, the greatest monarch of the Assyrian empire, paying tribute to the seven chief gods of his universe.

Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, stands on a lion. Nabu, the god of wisdom, stands on a *mushkushshu*, a drag-

on with the talons of an eagle. Ashur, the king of the gods, stands on a *mushkushshu* and a bull. All face the direction of the canal's current.

At either end the king stands facing inwards. He holds a mace in one hand and a ring of supplication in the other. "The scientific community has known about the site since 1972," said Francesca Simi, from the University of Udine and part of the Italian-Iraqi team of archaeologists working on the canal. In that year, a British archaeologist, Julian Reade, was taken by villagers to see three reliefs poking out of the hillside.

In the following decades, between the wars, more friezes were found and then covered up again as archaeologists were forced to abandon work.

The site of the canal is northwest of Mosul, the modern Iraqi city that sits on top of the ancient Assyrian capital Nineveh and was captured by Isis in 2014. The canal itself is in the territory of the Kurdish Autonomous Region,



King Sennacherib pays tribute to the gods in a frieze unveiled after it was first seen by a British archaeologist 50 years ago

which was Isis's next target. "Islamic State was devastating heritage sites, so the director of antiquities decided the reliefs were again much safer buried under the canalside," Simi said.

One silver lining to the cloud of so much destruction and delay has been the development of advanced archaeological techniques, which have shown the full scale of the Assyrians' remarkable civilisation.

Sennacherib, who reigned from 705-

681BC, was one of the great builders of the ancient world.

Many of ancient Assyria's finest artworks are now in the British Museum. Much of what was left on site was destroyed by Isis, giving new value to reliefs still being found.

Last week, a separate US-Iraqi team announced they had found eight more panelled reliefs under the Nineveh city gates as they were trying to restore damage done by Isis, who blew up and

bulldozed not just Nineveh but the nearby sites of Nimrud and Hatra.

Bekas Jamaluddin Hasan, from Dohuk University, said the region now faced dangers from a war being waged by Turkey on the Kurdish guerrilla force the PKK, which has bases in the district. But he said that the Kurdish local authorities, who are trying to use the region's history as a cradle of Mesopotamian culture to develop tourism, were investing heavily in security.

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## FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT

Italy's family-run hotels fear that big international hospitality groups owned by the likes of Bill Gates will ruin their fortunes

Philip Willan

SORRENTO



Like most of the tourism industry in Italy the Hotel Mediterraneo is celebrating the last gasp of a bumper summer. Well-heeled foreign visitors are welcome in this luxury hotel, perched on a promontory above Sorrento and offering spectacular views across the Bay of Naples to Mount Vesuvius. Less welcome are the deep-pocketed foreigners who have been buying up some of Italy's most illustrious hotels.

Small independent hoteliers fear that family-run establishments will find it hard to compete against some of the world's most powerful hotel groups.

Pietro Monti, the Mediterraneo's marketing manager, acknowledged there was little that could be done to prevent the foreign titans from making inroads in Italy, but said the government should do more to help local hotel businesses become bigger.

"We're worried. It's very difficult for the small Italian hotelier to compete. Since Covid many small companies have been in crisis and Italy has become a

supermarket for the big groups," Monti said.

The foreign titans have not arrived in Sorrento yet, but they are just across the water in Capri. Two years ago the Capri Palace, one of the island's most luxurious hotels, was taken over by the Jumeirah Group, based in the United Arab Emirates.

International groups have been buying hotels in the country's major art cities and eight new luxury hotels are expected to open in Rome over two years.

Bill Gates's Four Seasons group caused controversy when it emerged it was negotiating to take over the lease of the Palazzo della Rovere, a frescoed Renaissance palace, replacing the family-run Hotel Columbus.

The building is owned by the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, Catholic knights dating back to the crusades. Under the planned deal the order would receive an annual rent of about \$1 million, which would go to support the church in the Holy Land.

The expected promotion of the hotel from a four-star to a five-star caused embarrassment in the Vatican, where it was seen as at

The Mediterraneo sits above the Bay of Naples on the Amalfi coast

odds with the Pope's preferential option for the poor.

Gates is also planning a six-star hotel near the Spanish Steps. It will be located in the 17th century Palazzo Marini, which he has agreed to buy for \$170 million.

Monti fears that the tradition of informal, family-based hospitality practised at the Mediterraneo could struggle to survive. It is an archetypal family hotel, located in what was once the home of his great-grandmother, Antonietta Lauro. It opened in 1952 and Monti runs it with a brother and two cousins.

It earned its fifth star in May last year and enjoys the support of a loyal staff. The pizza chef has been with the hotel for 50 years and his son is the chief barman.

Monti began working in the hotel at the age of 15 as a punishment for failing his English exam. His mother decided that contact with English-speaking guests would help him when he came to resit the exam at the end of the summer holiday. He enjoyed it and asked to come back the following year.

The family's best-known scion was Achille Lauro, who went to sea as a cabin boy and ended up a shipping magnate who was also mayor of Naples.

Bernabo Bocca, president of the hoteliers' association, is more sanguine about the arrival of the five-star foreigners. "The competition will be different. A big group with an international known brand has a different kind of firepower," he said.

"Their arrival should be a cause of pride, though. The whole system will benefit, with top level facilities bringing in a very high-level clientele and contributing to the value chain."

