

Archaeology and empire in the first millennium BC: Ziyaret Tepe

John MacGinnis | Cambridge

The Assyrian empire and Ziyaret Tepe

The Assyrian empire was the first multinational empire in the ancient Near East. Its origins lay in an aggressive expansion which commenced around the turn of the ninth century BC. By the seventh century the empire had grown to cover all of Iraq, Syria and the Levant, substantial portions of western Iran and southeastern Turkey and even, for brief periods, Egypt. When the time came, however, the end was rapid. Nineveh was sacked in 612 BC by the Babylonians, Medes and Cimmerians, signalling a process of collapse which in a period of just a few years led to complete disintegration. In the site of Ziyaret Tepe we have a unique opportunity to explore and document Assyrian rule across the whole of this time-span. The site lies on the river Tigris, some 60km east of Diyarbakır in southeastern Turkey. Known in antiquity as Tushan, it was a provincial capital and garrison town of the Assyrian empire from 882 to 611 BC. As an archaeological site it is of exceptional importance. The site is now threatened by the construction of the Ilisu Dam, the reservoir of which will inundate the lower town which constitutes 90% of the site. The central mound will be left as an island, but experience shows that the prospects for mud-brick sites in these circumstances are not good. Thus, exploration of as much of this site as possible before its inundation is seen as a critical objective.

The Ziyaret Tepe Archaeological Project

The Ziyaret Tepe Archaeological Project (ZTAP) is constituted in order to explore this world-class site before its inundation. The overall orientation of the project is towards large-scale excavation in multiple areas supported by a wide selection of scientific techniques. The ZTAP is an international umbrella project. To date this has seen the participation of teams from Britain, Germany, Turkey and the USA. The fieldwork being carried out at Ziyaret Tepe is in fact now the largest-scale and most productive excavation being carried out on any Assyrian site. It is transforming our understanding of the Assyrian presence in the northern part of the empire. We only have a few years left in which to recover the maximum from this extraordinary site.

The British team is responsible for the lower town where it has been working since 2000. Past work has included excavation of a gateway in the eastern city wall (Area D), a high-status residence (Area G), an area of later occupation (Area J), a section through the city wall with an area of low-status housing built against it (Area K) and a section through a street (Area M). More recently we have been working on a monumental gateway in the southern city wall (Area Q) and a major administrative complex (Area R). Both these areas have yielded superb results.



Area Q city gate

The existence of the monumental gate was first brought to our attention by the resistivity survey. Excavation confirmed the presence of a chambered gate complex with a road running through. For both the road and the architecture there is now evidence for four constructional phases which clearly show how the size and configuration of the gate chambers were repeatedly readjusted with each rebuilding. Furthermore, the succession of associated floor levels has produced an assemblage of *in situ* deposits which are painting a vivid picture of the soldiers who spent their lives on guard duty. Numerous graves were cut into these floors. These too must relate to the soldiers quartered at the gate. The assemblages in these graves have yielded some spectacular ceramics. Another exceptional find is a cylinder seal depicting a sacred tree flanked by two worshippers under a winged disc and accompanied by a number of divine symbols; a highly unusual feature of this seal is that the metal caps are still intact.



Cylinder seal

Looking ahead, the resistivity survey has also revealed the existence of an architectural complex parallel to the road north of the gate: this must represent barracks blocks or store-rooms, and investigation of these remains is highly desirable.

The identification and excavation of the administrative complex in Area R has been one of the great successes of the British mission. It measures 25m by 40m and comprises suites of rooms arranged around two courtyards. The courtyards themselves are of interest, both being surfaced with beautiful pavements of black and white stones laid out in a

chessboard fashion. The complex is characterised by the presence of a large number of pithoi (huge storage jars) and also by vast numbers of clay tokens, the presence of which strongly supports the idea of an administrative function for the building. A further recent find also suggestive of this function is a huge stone duck weight: this weighs exactly 30kg (equating to the Assyrian talent) and is likely to have been used only in the context of a major centralised bureaucracy.

The finds have also included an archive of clay tablets with inscriptions written in ancient Assyrian cuneiform script. These turn out to date from 611 BC, that is, in the very small window of events between the sack of Nineveh in 612 BC and the final collapse of the empire in 610 BC. Most of them are administrative – registers, lists, loans – but one letter is exceptional. It is a report from a high official detailing the mass desertions that have made it impossible to carry out an order to raise a unit of chariotry. This can only have been written as the empire collapsed and the front line closed in on Tushan. These are a truly extraordinary find. No other site has yielded such information and the publication of these tablets in 2008 was described as one of the most exciting publications in Near Eastern archaeology of the year.

Understanding the urban layout is another important part of the fieldwork in the lower town. A huge amount is being learnt through geophysical prospecting, through the use of magnetometry, resistivity and ground-penetrating radar. The results, combined with what we have learned through excavation, are leading to a steadily enhanced picture of the organisation of the city, reconstructing the ancient street plan and indicating some of the different quarters of the city – barracks, residential areas, industrial areas, etc. An important corollary is that, as we reconstruct the ancient street plan, we have a better understanding of the location of blocks of middle-range housing. This is exciting, as identification and excavation of an area of middle-status housing is an outstanding objective of the project. This would complement the study of the low-status dwellings by the city wall, the Area G residence and the palace on the high mound.

Project aims 2012–2014

We have very little time before Ziyaret Tepe is scheduled to be inundated and we are now planning for the final phase of the project. The results of the magnetometry survey suggest there may be an area of elite housing in the southeastern sector of the town, and excavation of at least one of these complexes is a major aim. West of this we believe there may be a block of middle-status housing, investigation of which is also a key objective. We are also keen to investigate the complex appearing on the resistivity map north of the gateway which may represent a barracks complex, to investigate an area of remains recently discovered just outside the city walls and to excavate features cut into the pavement in courtyard 11 which we now suspect to be important graves. Lastly, we plan to finish the remote-sensing mapping of the lower town. These therefore form the aims for 2012–2014.



Clay tokens

It is a privilege to work at such an exceptional and wonderful site, and we are unremittingly dedicated to recovering as much as possible of this unique heritage.

Bibliography

- MacGinnis, J.D.A. 2011: 'A Neo-Assyrian tablet from the governor's palace of Tušhan' *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 71
- MacGinnis, J.D.A., Matney, T. 2009a: 'Archaeology at the frontiers: excavating a provincial capital of the Assyrian empire' *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 23: 1–19
- 2009b: 'Ziyaret Tepe: digging the frontier of the Assyrian empire' *Current World Archaeology* 37: 30–40
- Matney, T. 2010: 'Material culture and identity: Assyrian, Arameans and the indigenous peoples of Iron Age south-eastern Anatolia' in S. Steadman, J. Ross (eds), *Agency and Identity in the Ancient Near East: New Paths Forward*. London: 129–47
- Matney, T., Greenfield, T., Hartenberger, B., Keskin, A., Köroğlu, K., MacGinnis, J.D.A., Monroe, W., Rainville, L., Shepperson, M., Vorderstrasse, T., Wicke, D. 2009: 'Excavations at Ziyaret Tepe, 2007–2008' *Anatolica* 35: 37–84
- Matney, T., MacGinnis, J.D.A., McDonald, H., Nicoll, K., Rainville, L., Roaf, M., Smith, M.L., Stein, D. 2003: 'Archaeological investigations at Ziyaret Tepe, 2002' *Anatolica* 29: 175–221
- Matney, T., Rainville, L., Demko, T., Kayser, S., Köroğlu, K., McDonald, H., MacGinnis, J.D.A., Nicoll, K., Parpola, S., Reimann, M., Roaf, M., Schmidt, P., Szuchman, J. 2005: 'Archaeological investigations at Ziyaret Tepe, 2003–2004' *Anatolica* 31: 19–68
- Matney, T., Rainville, L., Köroğlu, K., Keskin, A., Vorderstrasse, T., Findik, N.Ö., Donkin, A. 2007: 'Report on excavations at Ziyaret Tepe, 2006 season' *Anatolica* 33: 23–74
- Matney, T., Roaf, M., MacGinnis, J.D.A., McDonald, H. 2002: 'Archaeological excavations at Ziyaret Tepe, 2000 and 2001' *Anatolica* 28: 47–89