

## Radical burial practice in the Uruk collapse

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The archaeological site of Başur Höyük sits aside the Başur river, a tributary of the Tigris, forming a large tell on the river bank containing the remains of 7,000 years of human activity. An international team led by Haluk Sağlamtimur of Ege University has been excavating at the site in advance of the construction of the Ilisu dam; this has been a vast effort that has revealed traces of occupation from the Ubaid period to the medieval in terms of the pottery, stone tools and other cultural materials recovered. Başur hovers on the northern edges of the Mesopotamian sphere of influence, the heartland of the world's first cities, states and empires; systematic excavation has demonstrated that this corner of the Tigris region had longstanding ties to the 'Cradle of Civilization' identified further south. In the fourth millennium BC, Başur was clearly in contact with the southern Mesopotamian culture that appears throughout the wider region. The pottery and material culture of the pre-eminent Mesopotamian city of the time – Uruk – appears at Başur, including the ubiquitous 'bevel-rimmed bowls' that are the calling card of the southern city. Like many sites, Başur experienced a decline at the end of the fourth millennium. However, it is what came next at Başur that makes the site so interesting, and the finds from the 2014–2015 seasons have been the focus of very exciting recent research.



The site of Başur Höyük.

In 2014, a series of impressive stone tombs was identified, cut into the earlier Uruk fortifications. These were identified as Early Bronze Age, from the tumultuous period after the collapse of Uruk influence. A wealth of bronze, ceramic and bead offerings was found in the tombs. In 2015, however, an even more interesting discovery was excavated: a large mass-burial pit containing the remains of around 50 individuals. The physical anthropology team is now working to put together the story of these startling graves found at Başur Höyük. Laboratory analysis has begun at Ege University in order to identify the dead by using clues from bones and teeth to determine who was buried there – men, women and/or children – and forensic techniques to look for subtle signs of trauma or disease in the skeletons uncovered. Modern photogrammetric 3D methods are also being used to reconstruct the mass grave, in order to calculate how many individuals were buried there and how they were interred. The mystery of how nearly 50 people came to be buried together some 5,000 years ago on the banks of the Başur river is slowly being uncovered by the utilisation of a combination of forensic, archaeological and advanced digital-recording techniques.



The mass grave at Başur Höyük.