

Cultural Heritage Recovery and Preservation

Penn Museum Archaeologists Protect Assyrian History in Iraq



Image: The remains of the reconstructed entrance to the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II. ISIS detonated explosives in this building in 2015. To protect the original fragments, they are now covered with geotextile. Photo: Penn Museum. Available for download [here](#).

PHILADELPHIA, June 14, 2023—Archaeologists from the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, working together with an Iraqi excavation team, have uncovered more monumental finds in Nimrud, one of the heritage sites severely damaged by the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) in northern Iraq. Protecting and restoring cultural heritage is the project’s main goal. All artifacts will remain in Iraq as the team initiates a community-led process of reconstruction.

This marks the second season of excavations in Nimrud, the ancient city of Kalhu (biblical Calah)—once the glorious Assyrian Empire’s capital nearly 3,000 years ago. During earlier excavations in Nimrud, the same team revealed a 2,800-year-old palace belonging to an Assyrian king Adad-Nirari III, who reigned from 810–783 BCE. This season, the team continued working inside the palace and expanded its efforts to include the Temple of Ishtar, which burned when Nimrud was sacked by an invading army in 612 BCE.

Under the leadership of Dr. Michael Danti, Program Director of the Iraq Heritage Stabilization Program, the team of archaeologists found fragments of a stone monument—one of which depicts the goddess herself, a first of its kind.

"Our greatest find this season was a spectacular fragment from the stone stele that shows the goddess Ishtar inside a star symbol," explains Danti, a cultural heritage expert who has directed archaeological safeguarding efforts in Syria, Iraq, and Iran for more than 35 years. "This is the first unequivocal depiction of the goddess as Ishtar Sharrat-niphi, a divine aspect of the goddess associated with the rising of the planet Venus, the 'morning star,' to be found in this temple dedicated to her."

Other finds this season include:

- Monumental stone threshold slabs inscribed with cuneiform, the ancient wedge-shaped writing used by the Assyrians, which establishes Adad-nirari III in the genealogy of great Assyrian kings.
- Two colossal, well-carved stone column bases offering evidence of the palace's opulence and impressive décor. The palace area also yielded fragments made of ivory and ostrich eggshells—other indicators of an elite material culture, which reinforces Adad-nirari III's status and signals that his mother presumably lived there as well.
- A large stone basin in a throne room, with nearby parallel stone tracks believed to have guided a portable heater on wheels, used to heat water or the room itself.

The team also found incredible depictions of soldiers, horses, and people bearing gifts on many of the bronze door bands, along with an abundance of the nails that once held these bands to the cedar doors of a nearly 10-foot-wide gateway. In addition, they found iron bracings—all partially intact. The gateway joined the Ishtar and Ninurta temples, a connection that had long been suspected, but never revealed until now.

The excavations are being conducted in partnership with the Nineveh Department of Inspections of the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) and are funded by Penn's University Research Foundation and the Penn Museum.

The team reports it will be a long process, especially clearing the Northwest Palace, the epicenter of the explosions resulting from when ISIS detonated barrel bombs inside the reconstructed Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud in 2015 and later leveled the 165-foot-high ziggurat to its north. For now, the team is concentrating its excavation just outside this area—in the palace of Adad-nirari III and Temple of Ishtar. These were poorly understood areas on the old maps, and two short seasons have already clarified important issues, the archaeological team says.

Archaeologists have been working at Nimrud since the 1840s. Due to differences in documentation techniques, the older maps do not correlate well with one another. The Penn team has begun precisely mapping the structural remains with visible walls, comparing historic maps, and developing an accurate plan of the citadel.

Many of the structures ISIS destroyed were actually modern, built in the late 20th century CE. However, most sat on ancient foundations and incorporated original carved stone reliefs and other stone elements to recreate the ancient buildings. The Smithsonian Institution has been documenting and protecting scattered pieces of ancient reliefs, while researchers from Penn will help to reconstruct the buildings themselves.

In the next season, Penn Museum will continue excavating the gate's bronze decorations, following this complex into a temple dedicated to the god Ninurta, the Sumerian and Akkadian hero-god of war, hunting, and the south winds. Meanwhile, the team's cleanup efforts will continue to allow for the reconstruction to begin in the palace and select areas of the temple.

The same team unearthed intricate rock carvings at Nineveh last season. Their members include Danti; Dr. Richard L. Zettler, Associate Curator-in-Charge of the Penn Museum's Near East Section and Associate Professor in the Penn School of Arts and Sciences' Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations; Dr. William B. Hafford, Ur Project Field Director at the Penn Museum; Dr. Ali al-Jabbouri, the former Dean of the University of Mosul's College of Archaeology; Dr. John MacGinnis from the University of Cambridge; and Dr. Darren P. Ashby, Program Manager of the Iraq Heritage Stabilization Program.

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Editor's note: Downloadable images are available [here](#).

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About the Iraq Heritage Stabilization Program

The University of Pennsylvania's Iraq Heritage Stabilization Program works closely with Iraqi heritage professionals to protect and promote Iraq's diverse cultural heritage for both Iraqis and the global community.