

Ancient City Of Idu Discovered Beneath Mound In Iraq



In the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq archaeologists have discovered an ancient city called Idu, hidden beneath a mound.

Cuneiform inscriptions and works of art reveal the palaces that flourished in the city throughout its history thousands of years ago.

Located in a valley on the northern bank of the lower Zab River, the city's remains are now part of [a mound created by human occupation](#) called a tell, which rises about 32 feet (10 meters) above the surrounding plain. The earliest remains date back to Neolithic times, when farming first appeared in the Middle East, and a modern-day village called Satu Qala now lies on top of the tell.

The city thrived between 3,300 and 2,900 years ago, said Cinzia Pappi, an archaeologist at the Universität Leipzig in Germany. At the start of this period, the city was under the control of the [Assyrian Empire](#) and was used to administer the surrounding territory. Later on, as the empire declined, the city gained its independence and became the center of a kingdom that lasted for about 140 years, until the Assyrians reconquered it. [\[See Photos of Discoveries at the Ancient City of Idu\]](#) The researchers were able to determine the site's ancient name when, during a survey of the area in 2008, a villager brought them an inscription with the city's ancient name engraved on it. Excavations were conducted in 2010 and 2011, and the team reported its findings in the most recent edition of the journal *Anatolica*.

"Very few archaeological excavations had been conducted in Iraqi Kurdistan before 2008," Pappi wrote in an email to LiveScience. Conflicts in Iraq over the past three decades have made it difficult to work there. Additionally archaeologists before that time tended to favor excavations in the south of Iraq at places like Uruk and Ur.

The effects of recent history are evident on the mound. In 1987, Saddam Hussein's forces attacked and partly burnt the modern-day village as part of a larger campaign against the Kurds, and "traces of this attack are still visible," Pappi said.

Ancient palaces

The art and [cuneiform inscriptions](#) the team uncovered provide glimpses of the ancient city's extravagant palaces.

When Idu was an independent city, one of its rulers, Ba'ilanu, went so far as to boast that his palace was better than any of his predecessors'. "The palace which he built he made greater than that of his fathers," he claimed in the translated inscription. (His father, Abbi-zeri, made no such boast.)

Two works of art hint at the decorations adorning the palaces at the time Idu was independent. One piece of artwork, [a bearded sphinx](#) with the head of a human male and the body of a winged lion, was drawn onto a glazed brick that the researchers found in four fragments. Above and below the sphinx, a surviving inscription reads, "Palace of Ba'auri, king of the land of Idu, son of Edima, also king of the land of Idu."

Another work that was created for the same ruler, and bearing the same inscription as that on the sphinx, shows a "striding horse crowned with a semicircular headstall and led by a halter by a bearded man wearing a fringed short robe," Pappi and colleague Arne Wossink wrote in the journal article.



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Courtesy Cinzia Pappi

This work shows a bearded sphinx with a human male head and the body of a winged lion. Found in four fragments, it was also created for King Ba'auri and has almost the exact same inscription as the depiction of the horse.

Even during Assyrian rule, when Idu was used to administer the surrounding territory, finely decorated palaces were still built. For instance, the team discovered part of a glazed plaque whose colored decorations include a palmette, pomegranates and zigzag patterns. Only part of the inscription survives, but it reads, "Palace of Assurnasirpal, (king of the land of Assur)." Assurnasirpal refers to [Assurnasirpal II](#) (883-859 B.C.), the researchers said, adding that he, or one of his governors, must have built or rebuilt a palace at Idu after the Assyrians reconquered the city. [[The 10 Biggest Battles for the Control of Iraq](#)]

A hero facing a griffon

Another intriguing artifact, which may be from a palace, is a cylinder seal dating back about 2,600 years. When it was rolled on a piece of clay, it would have revealed a vivid mythical scene.

The scene would have shown a bow-wielding man crouching down before a griffon, as well as a morning star (a symbol of the goddess Ishtar), a lunar crescent (a symbol of the moon god) and a solar disc symbolizing [the sun god](#). A symbol called a rhomb, which represented fertility, was also shown.

"The image of the crouching hero with the bow is typical for warrior gods," Pappi wrote in the email.

"The most common of these was the god Ninurta, who also played an important role in the [Assyrian] state religion, and it is possible that the figure on the seal is meant to represent him."

Future work

Before conducting more digs, the researchers will need approval from both the local government and the people of the village.

"For wide-scale excavations to continue, at least some of these houses will have to be removed," Pappi said. "Unfortunately, until a settlement is reached between the villagers and the Kurdistan regional government, further work is currently not possible."

Although digging is not currently possible, the artifacts already excavated were recently analyzed further and more publications of the team's work will be appearing in the future. The archaeologists also plan to survey the surrounding area to get a sense of the size of the kingdom of Idu.