

# Chance Discovery of Assyrian Palace with Biblical Connections

The partial liberation of the Iraqi city Mosul, ancient Nineveh, from the control of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in early 2017 by a coalition of Iraqi government troops, Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, and other paramilitary organizations brought to light a surprising archaeological find. In 2014, ISIL fighters had demolished the popular Nabi Yunus shrine, the location commonly believed by Christians and Muslims to contain the tomb of the prophet Jonah (Yunus in the Koran). Following the liberation of eastern Mosul, Iraqi archaeologists discovered an impressive network of tunnels, dug by ISIL fighters under the demolished shrine, that contained underground structures of what they consider to be an ancient Neo-Assyrian palace dating to the seventh century BC.

It has long been recognized that one of the terror organization's income streams has come from trafficking antiquities.<sup>1</sup> The tunnel network suggests systematic looting, as the Iraqi archaeologists found numerous ancient objects and underground architectural remains. Due to the precarious construction of the tunnel network, researchers and government officials fear the imminent collapse of the tunnels, which would result in major damage to the ancient site.<sup>2</sup>

News reports about the chance discovery include references to Esarhaddon, the youngest son of Neo-Assyrian king Sennacherib who reigned the Neo-Assyrian Empire from 681 to 669 BC. Esarhaddon is known from three references in the Bible (2 Kgs 19:37; Isa 37:38; Ezra 4:3) describing his ascent to the throne following the assassination of his father Sennacherib and referencing him in the later context of the rebuilding of Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup>

While no scholarly presentation of the discovered artifacts and architectural data has yet occurred, news

reports quoting Iraqi archaeologist Layla Salih have suggested the discovery of a fragmented marble slab carrying a cuneiform inscription that uses terminology and phraseology exclusively associated with Esarhaddon's reign.<sup>4</sup>

Further stabilization of the haphazard tunnel network and the careful excavation and documentation of the palace structure will add to our knowledge about the Neo-Assyrian Empire and remind scholars and historians (who had read in the works of then-contemporary sources about this section of the Neo-Assyrian palace, which had not, however, yet been excavated) that there are still many surprising discoveries to be made.

Gerald A. Klingbeil  
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<sup>1</sup> "ISIL and Antiquities Trafficking," <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/isil-and-antiquities-trafficking>; "ISIL Looting heritage Sites on 'Industrial Scale,'" <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/isil-looting-heritage-sites-syria-iraq-palmyra-150703010527634.html> (both accessed May 24, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> "A 2,600-Year-Old Palace has Been Discovered Under a Shrine Demolished by ISIS," <http://www.sciencealert.com/a-2-600-year-old-palace-has-been-discovered-under-a-shrine-demolished-by-isis> (accessed May 24, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. A. Kirk Grayson, "Esarhaddon," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:574.

<sup>4</sup> "Previously Untouched 600BC Palace Discovered Under Shrine Demolished by ISIL in Mosul" <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/02/27/previously-untouched-600bc-palace-discovered-shrine-demolished/> (accessed May 24, 2017).