

ARCHAEOLOGY  
IN IRAQ

## ► QUEENS' GOLD

# Banished Assyrian Gold to Reemerge From Vault

A spectacular discovery rivaling the Royal Graves of Ur and King Tut's tomb will soon be put on display in Baghdad and available to scholars

**NIMRUD**—While clearing away debris from a palace room at the ruins of the ancient Assyrian capital of Kalhu in 1988, Iraqi archaeologist Muzahem Hussein spotted a few bricks laid in an odd pattern on the floor. That clue—which had gone unnoticed by generations of British excavators—led to a series of spectacular finds within three underground tombs that rivaled the Royal Cemetery of Ur and the bounty of Egypt's

craft of Assyrian goldsmiths but also provided unique insights into that ancient society's beliefs in the afterlife and into the life of its royal family. With limited information and lacking direct access, however, researchers have been left largely in the dark during the past decade.

The situation may soon change. Iraqi officials say they will place the grave goods on public display in Baghdad's Iraqi Muse-

we hope to continue now if we have the funding." His first target will be a largely unexplored area between the palace and ziggurat. He and other Iraqi archaeologists also hope to publish reports on finds they made in the early 1990s. For example, archaeologists discovered the remains of 300 manacled men in a deep well just meters from the royal tombs, according to Donny George, research director of the State Board of Antiquities. Foreign researchers familiar with the find speculate that they may have been the final defenders of the palace against the onslaught of Persians and Medes who destroyed the city in 612 B.C.

Already an ancient provincial center, Kalhu served as Assyria's capital for 150 years, starting with King Ashurnasirpal II (who ruled from 883–859 B.C.). Eight kilometers of wall enclosed the vast 352-hectare site; the northwest palace containing the



**Fit for a queen.** A delicately crafted gold crown and necklace from the 8th century B.C. were among the finds at Nimrud, ancient Kalhu.

King Tutankhamun's tomb. Hundreds of finely wrought gold objects in excellent condition were unearthed here, along with inscriptions identifying the remains of three Assyrian queens, consorts to leaders of a vast 8th century B.C. empire.

But war and its aftermath in modern Iraq quickly consigned the recovered grave goods to obscurity and a Baghdad bank vault, where they remain today. That disappearance has frustrated Near Eastern specialists. "The discovery was extraordinary in every regard—materials, technique, quantity—and of a kind never seen in antiquity," says Amir Harrak, an art historian at the University of Toronto. The excavations not only revealed the astonishing

um this fall, while Muzahem plans to release a detailed inventory and analysis. Scholars will meet in Britain in November\* to discuss the Nimrud gold as well as the deteriorating conditions and the still-present threat of looting at the site. But archaeologists agree that new excavations are sure to reveal additional goods and data in the ruins of Kalhu, called Calah in the Bible, which was the center of an empire stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean.

Digging may soon resume, says Muzahem, a 21-year veteran of the site: "There was no digging from 1992 until 2000, but

\* [www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/visit/events/ane\\_conf.html#2001](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/visit/events/ane_conf.html#2001)

tombs originally included a throne room decorated with painted stone reliefs and massive human-headed winged bulls.

Muzahem's original find in 1988 was a vaulted tomb containing a coffin still sealed with bitumen. Inside, the team discovered 200 objects, including gold, beads, cylinder seals, and a comb, along with the remains of an unidentified man. A year later, the team excavated a second burial complex. Within the coffin were the remains of a young woman resting against an older woman; they were identified as Atalia, the queen of Sargon II (who ruled from 721 to 705 B.C.), and her daughter Baniti, King Shalmaneser V's consort. The coffin and tomb were filled with hundreds



of intricate gold objects, from crowns to small rosettes, which may have decorated the women's long-decayed clothes.

Inscriptions point out a third royal woman, Yaba, whose remains likely were the cremated ashes found in a nearby niche—a burial technique rarely seen before in Assyria. A gold bowl describes her as the wife of King Tiglath-pileser, predecessor to Shalmaneser V. Also in 1989, a third tomb with 440 gold objects was discovered; the stone sarcophagus contained only dust. Scholars believe the tomb to be that of Ashurnasirpal II's queen and suspect that her body may have been moved to the religious center of Ashur; the royal cemetery there was looted in antiquity.

Some of the Nimrud jewelry pieces are

said to have no parallels in the Near East—for example, the bell-shaped earrings and large bangles inlaid with semiprecious stones and engraved with vertical bars. "There is incredibly fine workmanship," says Harrak. "It is more skillfully done than King Tut's treasure." The result, he adds, is a "revolution in our knowledge of ancient technology and of the Assyrian belief in life after death." Reviled in the Bible as a cruel and ruthless empire, Assyria's reputation has rested more on its military conquests than its aesthetics. But the tomb artifacts point to a native and highly developed artisan class.

The poor conditions at the Kalhu site threaten other finds,



**Ancient art.** An ornamental headband of woven gold (left) and a golden vessel found in queens' graves were likely used by ladies at the Kalhu palace, center of the Assyrian empire for 150 years.

however. During a recent visit by Western archaeologists, the effects of more than a decade of neglect were visible. Among the invaluable carved slabs from the palace, those not hauled off to European museums now lean against the partially reconstructed walls under collapsing metal awnings and are constantly exposed to the elements. Some of the palace rooms have been sealed to protect the carvings from looters, but other slabs may already have been lost. Sam Paley, an archaeologist at the State University of New York, Buffalo, says that slabs excavated by a Polish team in the 1970s and stored at Nimrud were broken into pieces; he has evidence that at least six are on the antiquities market. Each can fetch prices as high as \$1 million, he notes.

Meanwhile, the gold pictured here has been seen by only a handful since it was stored in its vault. George, who says he personally checked each piece 2 years ago, insists that the collection is in good condition despite bomb damage to the bank during the Gulf War. Once an adequate security system is installed at the museum, he says, the dazzling finds will be available to eager scholars.

—ANDREW LAWLER



**Golden oldies.** This finely wrought bracelet incorporates stylized snake heads into the design. The piece is evidence of highly developed crafts in Assyria.

