Ancient Tablets Decoded; Shed Light on Assyrian Empire

Posted GMT 12-9-2009 19:33:13

Meticulous ancient notetakers have given archaeologists a glimpse of what life was like 3,000 years ago in the Assyrian Empire, which controlled much of the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf.

Clay tablets inscribed with cuneiform, an ancient script once common in the Middle East, were unearthed in summer 2009 in an ancient palace in present-day southeastern Turkey.

Palace scribes jotted down seemingly mundane state affairs on the tablets during the Late Iron Age--which lasted from roughly the end of the ninth century B.C. until the mid-seventh century B.C.

But these everyday details, now in the early stages of decoding, may open up some of the inner workings of the Assyrian government--and the people who toiled in the empire, experts say.

"You're really getting at the nitty gritty of the management of the empire through these kind of records," said Melinda Zeder, director of the archaeobiology program at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., who was not involved in the research.

"And that does what history really should do--creates a connection between our lives and the lives of people [many] years ago," added Zeder, a member of the National Geographic Society's Committee for Research and Exploration. (The National Geographic Society owns National Geographic News.)

Fortified City

A team led by University of Akron archaeologist Timothy Matney has been excavating the massive mud brick palace, once inhabited by the governor of the empire's Tushhan Province, for more than a decade.

The palace is located in Ziyaret Tepe, one of three fortified cities that the Assyrians built in the northern reach of their empire on the banks of the Tigris River.

These urban administrative centers allowed Assyrians to exploit timber, stone, and metal resources from the mountains of eastern Turkey, materials that were relatively scarce in the empire's heartland near present-day Al Mawsil (Mosul), Iraq, Matney said.

Mystery Women

So far, the team has deciphered lists of names of 144 women on the tablets who were likely employed by the palace as agricultural workers or laborers at its granary.

Yet while the tablets were written in the Late Assyrian language, the women's names are not Assyrian, Matney said.

That means the women may have been from local indigenous populations, or part of a mass relocation of people conquered by the Assyrians in another part of the empire, Matney said.

"The Assyrians deported large numbers of people--hundreds of thousands--from one part of the empire to another in order to break up local power structures and to move agricultural workers where they needed them," he said.

"It's an intriguing possibility that these women may have been one group that was involved in these deportations."

The National Museum of Natural History's Zeder said the Assyrians were one of the very earliest empires to leave behind extensive written records.

The files can help explain how, as a political entity, the empire controlled and administrated their large territories, she said.

"It will be very interesting to see what the role of women in this economy was, and also [perhaps] what the hierarchy was--were there Assyrian overlords, or was it all locally managed?"

Race Against the Clock

But those questions may never be fully answered.

When Matney and colleagues return to Ziyaret Tepe in 2010 to look for more tablets, they'll be racing against the clock: A planned hydroelectric dam project will swamp the region as early as 2013.

Nevertheless, Matney said, he Turkish government is supporting digs at places such as Ziyaret Tepe to discover as much as possible while such sites remain above water.

Brian Handwerk
National Geographic News

© 2011, Assyrian International News Agency. All Rights Reserved. Terms of Use.