



## **Iraqi Dam Will Obliterate Ancient Assyrian Capital**

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LONDON -- The Iraqi government is building a dam which will destroy the ancient city of Assur, the former capital which gave its name to Assyria. Although it has received no publicity outside Iraq, the dam across the Tigris is likely to result in one of the greatest archaeological losses of modern times. John Curtis, the British Museum's keeper of Ancient Near East, returned from a visit to Baghdad last month, and he told The Art Newspaper that the project "will destroy most of the remains of Assur". He points out that the city, occupied by the Assyrians for some 2,000 years, is "arguably the most important archaeological site in the Near East."

Dr Curtis warns that the archaeological losses are likely to be even greater than those caused by the Aswan High Dam in 1970, when temples along the Nile were flooded. On that occasion, Unesco launched a huge international rescue operation, but in the current political situation that would be impossible in Iraq. The rapid timetable for the Iraqi dam and the unexcavated nature of the remains at Assur would also make rescue work a major challenge.

Iraq is embarking on the dam because its hostile neighbour Turkey is taking more water from the source of the Tigris. At times there is so little water in the river downstream that it is apparently possible to walk across it at Mosul, the main city of northern Iraq. The new dam will store water, providing supplies for agriculture and the towns during the dry season.

The Makhul dam is being built 80 miles south of Mosul, spanning the Tigris valley between the Jebel Makhul and Jebel Hamrin mountains. This will create a lake which will run back for more than 20 miles and flood most of Assur.

The ancient city lies on a promontory, with its eastern edge on the flood plain of the Tigris and its northern edge in the valley of the river's old course. The new lake would rise well above the lower levels of the ancient city and the water table would cause severe damage higher up. In addition to Assur, at least 100 other Assyrian sites would be lost or damaged by the new lake. These include Kar Tukulti-Ninurta, the important city built in the 13th century BC just to the north of Assur.

### Assyrian capital

Assur (or Ashur) became the capital of Assyria by 2000 BC and it remained the religious centre of the empire until its capture by the Babylonians in 614 BC. It represented the centre of an empire which at its height stretched from present-day Egypt to Iran.

German archaeologists began to excavate Assur in 1903 and many of the most important finds are in Berlin's Vorderasiatisches Museum. But despite a century of extensive excavations, large areas of the city remain virtually uninvestigated. Only a third of the 34 temples which were recorded shortly before the Babylonian invasion have been found. Still buried must be the greatest works of art from the royal workshops of the 13th century BC, residences of merchants from the 18th century BC and temples built before the 21st century BC.

The commercial and residential areas of Assur were on the lower levels, and these will be completely flooded by the Makhul Dam. Although the upper level of the city is 100 feet above the present river, the new lake will mean a substantial rise in the water table, and this will destroy most of the archaeological remains. Cuneiform tablets, for instance, will simply turn to mud.

In order to minimise damage to Assur, two solutions have been proposed by Iraqi archaeologists. The first would be the construction of a coffer-dam or dyke around the entire site of Assur. This would have to be several miles long and would be very expensive, possibly several times more than the main Makhul Dam. With the present shortage of government funds because of the economic problems resulting from international sanctions it is difficult to see Saddam Hussein being willing to divert resources for a coffer-dam.

The second proposal is that the Makhul Dam should not be as high as originally planned, resulting in a smaller storage lake. However, this would negate many of the benefits of the water storage project, probably making it uneconomic. It would also still flood low-lying remains at Assur, and the rise in the water table would cause further damage.

### Rescue

Last month senior Iraqi government antiquities official Muayad Damerji told The Art Newspaper that he personally believes that the solution is to "build a concrete wall around Assur." He admits it would be "very expensive", but points out that "we need water and we

need Assur."

Dr Damerji says that although the Ministry of Irrigation is considering a coffer-dam, detailed information on the levels of the archaeological strata has not yet been requested from the antiquities department. There is clearly great concern over whether funds will be available for this protective scheme.

It is difficult to discover what is happening on the ground, but work has apparently begun on the foundations of the main dam. Completion is expected to take around five years, and the project is being undertaken entirely by Iraqi contractors. Although some archaeological excavations are currently under way by German and Iraqi specialists, this is normal work and not a rescue dig. Within the time available, it would be very difficult to mount any large-scale excavation programme.

However, archaeologists have now decided to do what they can to mobilise international support to save Assur. At an academic conference on Nimrud, held at the British Museum in March, a resolution was approved which warned of the damaging consequences of the Makhul Dam: "The conference urges all concerned parties, both within Iraq and internationally, to explore every possible means of preserving the site of Assur which is of unique importance in the history of Iraq in particular and world civilisation in general."

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