

Archaeologists discover lost language

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Detail from the tablet found at Ziyaret Tepe. Inscribed with Cuneiform characters, the tablet consists of a list of women's names, many of which appear to be from a previously unknown language. Credit: John MacGinnis

Evidence for a forgotten ancient language which dates back more than 2,500 years, to the time of the Assyrian Empire, has been found by archaeologists working in Turkey.

Researchers working at Ziyaret Tepe, the probable site of the ancient Assyrian city of Tušhan, believe that the language may have been spoken by deportees originally from the Zagros Mountains, on the border of modern-day Iran and Iraq.

In keeping with a policy widely practised across the Assyrian Empire, these people may have been forcibly moved from their homeland and resettled in what is now south-east Turkey, where they would have been set to work building the new frontier city and farming its hinterland.

The evidence for the language they spoke comes from a single clay tablet, which was preserved after it was baked in a fire that destroyed the palace in Tušhan at some point around the end of the 8th century BCE. Inscribed with cuneiform characters, the tablet is essentially a list of the names of women who were attached to the palace and the local Assyrian administration.

Writing in the new issue of the Journal Of Near Eastern Studies, Dr John MacGinnis, from the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, University of Cambridge, explains how the nature of these names has piqued the interest of researchers.

“Altogether around 60 names are preserved,” MacGinnis said. “One or two are actually Assyrian and a few more may belong to other known languages of the period, such as Luwian or Hurrian, but the great majority belong to a previously unidentified language.”

“If the theory that the speakers of this language came from western Iran is correct, then there is the potential here to complete the picture of the world’s first multi-ethnic empire. We know from existing texts that the Assyrians did conquer people from that region. Now we know that there is another language, perhaps from the same area, and maybe more evidence of its existence waiting to be discovered.”

Ziyaret Tepe is on the River Tigris in south east Turkey, and has been the subject of extensive archaeological excavations since 1997. Recent work has revealed evidence that it was probably once the site of the Assyrian frontier city of Tušhan. In particular, it is thought that the remains of a monumental building excavated on the site are those of the governor’s palace, built by the Assyrian King Ashurnasirpal II (883 – 859 BCE).

The tablet was found in what may have been the palace’s throne room by

Dr Dirk Wicke of the University of Mainz, working as part of a team led by Professor Timothy Matney of the University Akron, Ohio. When a conflagration destroyed the palace, perhaps around the year 700 BCE, the tablet was baked and much of its contents on the obverse side preserved.

MacGinnis was handed the task of deciphering the tablet and has identified a total of 144 names, of which 59 can still be made out. His analysis systematically rules out not only common languages from within the Assyrian Empire, but also other languages of the time – including Egyptian, Elamite, Urartian or West Semitic. Even at its most generous, his assessment suggests that only 15 of the legible names belong to a language previously known to historians.

The report also posits several theories about where this mysterious language may have come from. One notion is that it may be Shubrian – the indigenous language spoken in the Tušhan area before the Assyrians arrived. As far as historians know, Shubrian was never written down. In addition, it is believed to have been a dialect of Hurrian, which is known and does not appear to bear any resemblance to most of the names on the tablet.

Another theory is that it was the language spoken by the Mushki – a people who were migrating to Eastern Anatolia at around the time the tablet was made. This idea seems less plausible, however, as to appear on the list of the Assyrian administration, these people would either have infiltrated the Empire or been captured, and historians have evidence for neither.

More convincing is the theory that the language in question may have been spoken by a people from somewhere else in the Assyrian Empire who were forcibly moved by the administration.

This was standard practice for successive Assyrian Kings, particularly after the Empire began to expand during the 9th century. “It was an approach which helped them to consolidate power by breaking the control of the ruling elite in newly-conquered areas,” MacGinnis said. “If people were deported to a new location, they were entirely dependent on the Assyrian administration for their well-being.”

Although historians already know that the Zagros Mountains were in a region invaded and annexed by the Assyrians, it remains, to date, the one area under Assyrian occupation for which no known language exists. That makes it tempting to link the text on the tablet to the same region. An Assyrian King, Esarhaddon, even referred to an unidentified [language](#), Mekhranian, which supposedly hailed from the Zagros, but in practice the area was probably a patchwork of chiefdoms and more than one dialect may have been in use.

“If correct this suggests that Iran was home to previously unknown languages,” MacGinnis said. “The immediate impression is that the names on this tablet were those of women who belonged to an isolated community. It may be, however, that there were others whom we still have to find out about.”

The tablet is currently being stored in Diyarbakir, Turkey, where it is hoped that it will eventually go on public display. Dr MacGinnis’ report on its decipherment is published in the April issue of the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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