

Sardis dig yields enigmatic trove: Ritual egg in a pot

March 4 2014, by Terry Devitt



An enigmatic ritual deposit, found intact beneath the floor of a first century Roman house in Sardis, a key archaeological site of the classic world in modern Turkey. The deposit, found inside two bowls, included a number of small implements, a unique coin and an egg. The hole in the egg was made in antiquity. Credit: Archaeological Exploration of Sardis/Harvard University

By any measure, the ancient city of Sardis—home of the fabled King Croesus, a name synonymous with gold and vast wealth, and the city where coinage was invented—is an archaeological wonder.

The ruins of Sardis, in what is now Turkey, have been a rich source of knowledge about classical antiquity from the 7th century B.C., when the city was the capital of Lydia, through later Greek and Roman occupations.

Now, however, Sardis has given up another treasure in the form of two enigmatic ritual deposits, which are proving more difficult to fathom than the coins for which the city was famous.

"The two deposits each consist of a small pot with a lid, a coin, a group of sharp metal implements and an egg, one of which is intact except for a hole carefully punched in it in antiquity," explains Will Bruce, a classics graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who has been digging at Sardis for the past six years. Bruce made the finds last summer.

The dig at Sardis is overseen by Nicholas Cahill, a UW-Madison professor of art history. Cahill has directed field research at Sardis for decades. Both ritual deposits, says Cahill, date from the Roman era of Sardis, about A.D. 70 or 80.

Bruce and his team were excavating below the floor of a first century room, built over the ruins of an earlier building, which had probably been destroyed in a massive earthquake in A.D. 17.



An inverted bowl, covering another bowl with a ritual deposit, emerges from the earth at Sardis. The bowls contained a ritual deposit of a coin, small metal implements and an egg. The intact deposit mirrors similar discoveries made by Princeton University archaeologists 100 years ago, although those discoveries were not intact. Credit: Archaeological Exploration of Sardis/Harvard University

Digging beneath the floor, Bruce and his colleagues first uncovered a thin-walled, nearly intact jug and, nearby, an assemblage of mostly unbroken pottery. "It looked like we were reaching a more intact deposit instead of fill," says Bruce.

Within that assemblage, Bruce began to carefully uncover an inverted bowl, which turned out to be sitting on top of another bowl. The bowls, still filled with dirt, were carefully removed and immediately turned over to conservators who cleaned and disassembled them to find a set of small

pointed instruments, a coin with a lion and portrait of Nero, and the intact egg.



A gold coin found at Sardis. Another coin, bearing the likeness of Emperor Nero, was also found. Credit: Archaeological Exploration of Sardis/Harvard University

"The ritual offerings were dug into pits in the floor, after the room was constructed," says Cahill. "We know they were renovating the room periodically, because in another part of the space there was a dump of painted wall plaster buried under the floor, presumably in a renovation."

"The meaning of these deposits is still quite open to interpretation," notes Cahill, "but burying votive deposits below ground or in a wall was a fairly common practice," perhaps as a ritual offering to protect the house. Roman literary sources suggest eggs were used in particular rituals.

For the [archaeologists](#), part of the intrigue is that similar groups of bowls, needles, coins and eggs were discovered at Sardis more than 100

years ago when the temple of Artemis was excavated by Princeton University archaeologists. "It is an exact parallel to what they found in the early 20th century," according to Cahill.



Scholars digging at Sardis, the capital of ancient Lydia later occupied by Greeks and Romans. Sardis, in modern Turkey, was the fabled home of King Croesus, the richest man of his day, according to lore. Credit: Archaeological Exploration of Sardis/Harvard University

The coin was also unique. Sardis is famous as the place where coinage was invented in the Western world, first using electrum, an alloy of silver and gold, and later of pure gold and silver. Nearby sources of gold made ancient Lydia, and King Croesus, fabulously wealthy. While these

Lydian coins are very rare, coins and coin hoards from later Greek and Roman occupiers of Sardis are routinely found.

But the coin found with the egg, says Cahill, seems to be special.

"The coin has a portrait of Nero on the front. The original reverse was hammered flat, and the image of a lion engraved in its place, which is very odd." Expert numismatists have never seen anything like it. "The image of the lion is important because it is emblematic of the Lydian kings and of their native mother goddess Cybele," Cahill says.

The discovery is unusual, Cahill notes, because finding ritualistic objects intact and in place after thousands of years is no everyday discovery, even in a rich archaeological context such as Sardis. "Ancient ritual was important to people. It is most unusual to find such fragile things so perfectly preserved."

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

Citation: Sardis dig yields enigmatic trove: Ritual egg in a pot (2014, March 4) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-03-sardis-yields-enigmatic-trove-ritual.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--