

# U of T archeologist digs Iron Age tablets, jewelry in Turkey

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Group finds 100,000 artifacts, including gold and silver, from between 1200 and 600 BC

He doesn't like to be compared to Indiana Jones, but a University of Toronto archeologist and his team have made an exciting find at a dig in southeastern Turkey that he expects will shed new light on a "dark age" in history.

And like the movie character played by Harrison Ford, he insists the treasure won't be sold but belongs in a museum.

Timothy Harrison and his staff of 40, who include students from the University of Toronto, University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University, have uncovered artifacts dating back to the Iron Age at an ancient temple near the Syrian border.

Estimating they have dug up 100,000 artifacts at the site – everything from gold and silver to jewelry to animal bones – Harrison is most excited about a cache of cuneiform tablets dating back to the period between 1200 and 600 BC.

"We think that these tablets actually have significant historical information in them that we don't have available anywhere else," Harrison said in an interview from the dig site at Reyhanli, Turkey.

"We may begin to fill in political history, some of the local kingdoms, maybe more understanding about how the Assyrians were administrating and ruling and controlling their empire."

The professor of near eastern archeology said little is known about the "dark age," a 300-year transitional time period between the collapse of the Bronze Age and the rise of the Iron Age, but it was thought to be a violent period when little writing was done. But the tablets he and his team have found may challenge that assumption, he suggested.

"Our excavation, we believe, is finding information to fill some of that gap," he said.

Harrison doesn't know yet what the tablets say, noting they are complex documents and are in a fragile state, and some are broken.

One tablet took nine hours to carefully extract from the site. The script on it is tiny, and it will take time to provide the translation, he said. Other tablets are less fragile and he expects

preliminary translations will be completed on those in the next few weeks. The longest document is like a book.

“It’s full of thousands of signs. It’ll be a long document... But we think it may be part of some kind of a temple archive or documents that were dealing with the maintenance of the cult rituals that took place in this temple,” he said.

Members of the team found the building last year, when they uncovered the entrance at Tell Tayinat, the capital of the Neo-Hittite Kingdom of Palastin, he said. But they didn’t have time to go all the way back into the inner sanctum of the complex until this summer, where they found a treasure trove that he estimates is “priceless.”

There were ceramic vessels such as lamps, chalices and goblets, along with gold pieces of foil that may have been decoration, some pieces of silver and bronze objects including basins and fragments of objects that he speculates might be utensils.

Also found were many items of jewelry, including beads, semi-precious stones and rings. Some metal pieces found appeared to be from furniture. There were scarab-like signet rings that have carvings on them that give the name or signature of a person and were used to seal documents or put impressions on clay.

“There’s a lot of stuff in this room,” he said. The temple was burned in an intense fire and found filled with heavily charred brick and wood which, he said helped preserve its contents.

Harrison, who was born in the United States and spent much of his life in southeast Asia, said he has lived in Canada for the past 13 years when he’s not searching for archeological treasures.

He said his team has been working closely with the Ministry of Culture of Turkey. He said all of these artifacts will go into the museum in Antakya and will be stored there.

He said once the artifacts are handed over, his team’s work will shift to the analysis and research side, and he hopes to publish details of his team’s find in popular and academic journals.

- *The Canadian Press*