

## LETTER HOME FROM TURKEY

# Of mice and ancient men

Ottawa archeologist,  
team sift through  
embarrassment  
of riches at dig site



**JENNIFER GREEN**  
IN TEL TAYINAT

**T**he good news is that Canada's archeological team in Turkey believes it may have found the remains of the shield of an Assyrian warrior.

The bad news is that, over the winter, mice nibbled off identification labels and made snug little nests with the shreds.

Now the team has to spend days this summer trying to sort thousands of big pieces and tiny shards to figure out which belongs with which.

"It's a huge problem, trying to reconnect the tags to the bags," sighs project director Tim Harrison, as he looks down at chunks of charred wood wrapped in tinfoil, a laughably ineffective barrier against mice.

"We think this was a burned wooden beam from the temple (found in earlier seasons)."

Harrison, a professor of Near Eastern ancient history at the University of Toronto, has been working on this site with Ottawa archeologist and dig director Stephen Batiuk for the past decade.

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# Dig: Treasures sifted by the thousand from mound

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They have always bagged the great bulk of shards — easily 100,000 a year — in plastic, attached paper labels, then stored the bags at a concrete-block depot at the dig site.

Harrison is trying to raise the money and get official approvals for a new research facility at the site itself that will include better storage.

It's also indicative of the embarrassment of riches coming out of Tel Tayinat, east of Antakya, which was once the ancient city of Antioch at the southernmost tip of modern Turkey.

Exactly 41,553 items came from just one excavation area, about 100 square metres. The same square had 11,384 bits of bones, twice as many as on any other excavation square. "And they call us the throw-away culture," remarked Fiona Haughey, the dig's illustrator and registrar, who also specializes in the archeology of the Thames River.

The word tel or tell means a mound, coming from the Arabic word for "tall"

As the road from Antakya leaves behind the city's high hills, it comes into a hot, fertile plain, lined with cornfields. The occasional roadside house, with daubed mud brick walls and woven palm awnings, slips past just as Tel Tayinat, and its sister site, Tel Atchana, come into view. They are indeed mounds in absolutely flat surroundings.

Robert Braidwood, the archeologist who first excavated here in the 1930s, described a mound as an enormous inverted mud pie, as if a football stadium had been filled and turned over to dry in the sun. Generation after generation made their homes here of mud or mud and straw brick, which tended to collapse in heavy rain. They would simply build again on top, eventually ending up with a mound.

Climbing the dusty road to the dig, past cactus and fist-size thistles, it is hard not to feel an awe of history.

A few hundred metres away at Tel Atchana, one young archeologist in the team points out Sir Leonard Woolley's headquarters when he dug here in the 1930s. Long abandoned, but hardly ancient, it still looks impossibly romantic. It is said that Agatha Christie and her arche-



Citizen reporter Jennifer Green is in Tel Tayinat on the Amuq Plain in Turkey, where Ottawa's Stephen Batiuk is part of a group of 30 archeologists uncovering and sifting through 3,000-year-old artifacts. The team is hoping to piece together the mystery of how this once-powerful kingdom, possibly tied to the Biblical Philistines, rose and inexplicably collapsed.

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ologist husband visited here.

But what about those who lived and worked here 3,000 years ago? What would they think of the young students sifting through their garbage, or satellites in space, scanning the ground, trying to determine the shapes of their ancient cities?

This area once held great political power. It was a trade route, a fertile area for crops, and accomplished in textiles and metalworking.

The list of artifacts from 2009 alone gives an idea of life here: 13 figurines, 26 loom weights, 58 spindle whorls, 30 grinders, 53 nails, 24 weapons, and for some reason, 70 pieces of jewelry. On Wednesday, the team held a series of seminars which discussed, among other things, just why so much jewelry was lying around. Was it a status symbol as it is for us today? Or did jewelry just last longer somehow so archeologists are more likely to find it?

Before this classroom work, the students had already put in a full eight hours at the dig, which is about 20 minutes away from the residential school compound where they live and do their lab work every summer.

They were hot, smudged and thirsty, but still full of the stories of the day — the landowner hassling them even though permissions are in order, the equipment that wouldn't fit on the bus, the last of the



JENNIFER GREEN, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

A few of the thousands of shards unearthed from a mound at Tal Tayinat in Turkey await cleaning after a winter in storage. Mice got to the priceless relics over the winter, chewing up thousands of meticulously-recorded paper labels and leaving archaeologists with the huge task of re-sorting through their finds.

spares that simply slipped into a crack into the ground never to be seen again.

David Lipovitch is a Harvard zooarcheologist, who describes his workplace as "organic," meaning not as tidy as Harrison, the U of T professor, wishes it were. Lipovitch, originally from Toronto, looks at bone remains to see what they can tell us about which ethnic group ate what. He argues that it is a much more accurate way of determining a people's history than just looking at their pottery.

For instance, household dishes with willows, bridges and Chinese figures were wildly popular among the 19th century British, including in colonies like Canada.

"If you excavated in Ontario, you would find all this blue willow wear and you would conclude that everyone came from China."

At Tel Tayinat, there are more beef, pig and dog bones than in other areas, suggesting the marauding pirates from the Aegean likely arrived here, too. It remains to be seen whether they were peaceful.

Conservator Julie Unruh, of New York City's American Museum of Natural History, is working here on the Assyrian tablet found last season. As she works on it, staff photographer Jennifer Jackson takes pictures of the work, and sends them to epigrapher Jacob Lauinger, who translates them.

As to the Assyrian shield, the team just realized recently what it is. So far it looks like an extra-large pizza, very badly burned. Its full secrets will have to be unravelled over the summer.