

Ancient tablet bears scars of dark history

Artifact found in Turkey tells tale of violence and mass destruction



JENNY GREEN
IN TEL TAYINAT

TEL TAYINAT, Turkey

When conservator Julie Unruh looks at Tel Tayinat's 2,700-year-old clay tablet, she doesn't see an archaeological treasure. She sees a terrible story reverberating through time.

"I am so conscious that this object was witness to a day of horrific violence," said Unruh in her lab at the headquarters for the University of Toronto's archeological dig in south Turkey. "I don't even know how to say it. It lived through ... mass burning and destruction on the tel," the mound where the group is excavating.

Although archeologists are not sure exactly who lived here, the charred remains of an ancient temple indicate a true inferno. "It was the event that ended occupation of the tel, so whatever happened that day ... was probably horrific," says Unruh.

She isn't reading the cuneiform words on the tablet — that falls to epigrapher Jacob Lauinger. She is reading what has happened to the clay tablet itself. The colours and clarity of one side indicates that the heat was so intense it fired the tablet like a pot, and thus preserved it. The other side is in much worse shape, and the material between the two surfaces is nothing more than crumbles,

like crushed brick.

Unruh was at the team's headquarters about 15 kilometres from the dig last summer when the tablet was unearthed.

They had to move the tablet immediately. "Something like that, which is so important, and awfully fragile, you just have to get it out when you can. ... Once it was uncovered it was going to come out of the ground that day."

Archeologists usually do a "block lift" by excavating around an object they need to extract, so it sits on a pedestal of dirt before they make a horizontal cut. But in this case, the tablet was resting on a flagstone floor. The team didn't know just how thick the tablet was. If they made the cut in the wrong place, they might slice it in half.

Unruh wanted to stabilize the tablet by wrapping it in plastic wrap, but for some reason, none of the surrounding villages had any. Tin foil, they had. So she bound the tablet in foil, using stretchy first-aid tape to keep it together. Then the team used a cardboard box and builders' expanding foam to keep it secure. Finally, they used trowels to gently excavate under what they hoped was the bottom of the tablet. As they inched through the dirt, they slid a foil-lined piece of cardboard to support it. Finally, more foil and foam stabilized it further for the bumpy ride ahead.

Unruh had to clean it, but any water could have melted the clay.

"I'm not doing anything fancy. It's like a little mini ex-



JENNIFER JACKSON, DIG PHOTOGRAPHER

The 2,700-year-old tablet is believed to be a vassal treaty between a tyrant and the community under his thumb.

cavation," she says. She used dry brushes to wipe away dirt and a scalpel to get rid of the really hard mineral deposits, and wall plaster.

Team photographer Jennifer Jackson took photos and e-mailed them to Lauinger the epigrapher, who could then translate the tiny text. By late last fall, it was apparent that tablet recorded a vassal treaty written in 672 BC, spelling out to the community that they were under the thumb and control of a more powerful ruler, the Assyrian king Esarhaddon. If they did not obey him they would be subject to a long line of curses.

It's estimated the destruction happened about a century later, although it is not known why.

Later this week, the archeologists are planning the next stage: flipping the treaty to expose the side that isn't preserved as well. It may be full of holes, and virtually illegible, but a faint notation in the



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Conservator Julie Unruh at the Tel Tayinat archeological site in Turkey.

upper left corner is tantalizing: could it be the name of the king of Tayinat, who signed this treaty, acknowledging his fealty to the stronger king?

If so, it would tell the archeologists a lot.

"We don't have his name," say Unruh. "Any information like that would be gigantic."