

DIGGING FOR LOST TREASURE IN DARBANDYKHAN

By Lara Fatah

Kurdistan Regional Government, Iraq

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An Italian team of archeologists travel to the Berkl area near Darbandykhan to lay the groundwork for an extensive excavation of a Sassanian monument, due to take place in the Spring.

Once upon a time, or as the Kurds would say, *habu nabu*, there was an Armenian King, Nerses, that ruled the Sassanian Empire (226-651 AD), which included Kurdistan within its borders. Standing high on a hill in the Berkl area near Darbandykhan is one of the only known remaining Sassanian monuments, and it is a monument to King Nerses.

The location of the monument has been known since the turn of the last century, but due to the unrest that followed in the region, it was not until the present day that the site could be professionally excavated. In conjunction with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), an Italian team of archeologists from the Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, is currently carrying out a short research dig at the site, in order to prepare for the full excavation they intend to do in the spring.

Examining the actual monument has not been easy, because not only are there later constructions on top of it, an earlier excavation that removed some of the inscribed stones of the monument, had caused other stones to become scattered. The Italian team also fears that some of the bricks may have been looted over the past 10-15 years.

"We have known for a few years what the general gist of what is inscribed on the two main walls, but fully excavating the site, will allow us to understand the inscription and how it fits into what we already know," says Barbara Faticoni, one of the archeologists.

"This is the second most important known inscription from the Sassanian period, so it is very important that we now have the chance to study it in depth," she adds.

Faticoni is looking to when the team returns in the spring to complete their work and is excited to learn more about the actual structure of the monument; "Because there are so few surviving examples of Sassanian architecture, I'm looking forward to determining how the monument actually looked, it's important for us to learn these things, we will hopefully be able to reconstruct some of the monument too,"

she enthuses.

Faticoni is obviously passionate about the site as she confidently strides around its perimeter in her dusty work clothes and her sun-kissed face. She is a stark contrast with the three young Kurdish girls the Italians are training, who in their clean and pressed jeans with large sombrero-esque hats perched on their heads hover uncertainly on the periferies of the site.

"I think they are a little scared of doing something wrong and I'm not sure they realized we would actually involve them in the process, but it is the best way for them to learn," says Faticoni.

Working with Faticoni on the dig is Fabrizio Sinisi, the linguistic expert, who says that the only real problem that they have encountered is a language barrier.

"Communicating with the Kurdish workers has been fun at times, but even that is not too big a problem because we are used to working in foreign countries," he says. Sinisi also says that while the monument may look impressive sitting on its hill in the countryside around Darbandykhan, its distance from the town has given them a few logistical problems. Although the team was winding down its research dig and refilling all the trenches that they had dug, they were enthusiastically anticipating their return when they will not only complete the excavation but open an Italian cultural center in Erbil and start teaching at the University of Salahaddin.