

## THE OLDER ISHTAR TEMPLES IN ASHUR

**Stratigraphy, architecture and finds of an Ancient Oriental sanctuary dating from the second half of the third millennium B.C. to the middle of the second millennium B.C.**

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The Ishtar temples are the oldest building complexes in Ashur and up to now they have been the richest find spots in the entire city. The temple area is located in the north-western part of the city between the temple and palace district and the residential quarters in the so-called upper town.

Ishtar, or Sumerian Inana, who was venerated in this sanctuary, was the most important and most popular female deity in the Mesopotamian pantheon. She was the goddess of sexual love as well as war. In many cities all over Assyria and Babylonia there were temples dedicated to her and representing certain varieties of her multiple appearance or specific local peculiarities. Among the most famous were Ishtar of Uruk, Arbela, Ninive, and Ashur.

Even before the German excavations had started under the direction of the architect Walter Andrae in 1903 an Ishtar temple was known to have existed in Ashur through an inscription by the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I (1117-1077 B.C.). However, first archaeological evidence for its presence came only to light after the clearance of the Nabu temple, a sanctuary dating to the later period of the Assyrian empire in the 6th century B.C. Below its foundations, the excavators detected in a relatively restricted area, several partly juxtaposed as well as superseding structures oriented in a northern and north-western direction. The mutually superimposed building remains, the highly complicated layer sequence and find conditions set great demands on the contemporary excavation techniques. After four years of almost uninterrupted digging, Andrae was able to separate eight building layers in this area. Each layer consisted of an entirely new temple building or an already existing building with several renewals and redecorations including floor levels of different periods.

In the end it was possible to distinguish two main periods of use: Three buildings located next to each other were uncovered and identified as temples of the goddess Ishtar, based on the inscriptions found inside them. According to these texts, each of these temples were erected on demand of an Assyrian king whose name is stated in the inscriptions. The oldest and most elaborated construction dates to the reign of the Middle-Assyrian king Tukulti-Ninurta I (1244-1208 B.C.). These first three temples were called the „younger“ Ishtar temples.

Below them, remains of another five consecutive buildings were located. They turned out to be the oldest architectural evidence in Ashur and were consequently referred to as the „older“ (i.e. „archaic“) Ishtar temples. Although no inscription communicating anything as to which god was worshipped inside the earlier cultic buildings or who their builders were, there was nevertheless no reason to doubt that they as well had been dedicated to Ishtar, on grounds of the well-known cultic continuity in Ancient Near Eastern temple architecture. Furthermore, the fact that an Ishtar temple did already exist during the early periods in Ashur, was known from other epigraphic evidence.

The older Ishtar temples were in use for about one millennium, beginning in the second half of the third millennium B.C. to the middle of the second millennium B.C. Most artefacts of the temple area were found in these older buildings, especially in the layers H, G, and GF

dating from the latter part of the so-called Early Dynastic Period (ED III) to the beginning of the Akkadian Dynasty (ca. 2600-2350 B.C.).

According to their specific function, the finds can be differentiated into three categories:

- 1.) dedicative objects offered by the worshippers to the goddess for a wish or a prayer (e.g. prayer statuettes, jewelry, votive figurines, weapons)
- 2.) cultic objects that were used in religious ceremonies inside the temple (e.g. cult stands, incense burners, portable stepped altars, libation vases)
- 3.) objects of daily life which belong to the usual household of the temple and its members (e.g. clay vessels, tools, molds, grinding stones)

The *Ashur research project* run by the *Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft (DOG)* in cooperation with the *Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin* made it possible to use again the original excavation records, plans, sketches, and photographs from the German excavations between 1903 and 1914. Based on these sources it was also possible to detect most of the recorded finds in the magazines of the museum, nearly one hundred years after the end of the excavations.

The result was an entire re-examination of the sanctuary of the goddess Ishtar in Ashur, a reconstruction of the architecture of the different temple buildings, and a complete presentation of all artifacts, which consists of about 900 items. This was the first time that all these items were successfully located, described, categorized and cataloged.

<b>Ishtar temples: New stratigraphic sequence</b>		
<b>Building layers</b>	<b>Phases / Building structures</b>	<b>Chronology</b>
H	Longer use without determinable differentiation of building phases or floor levels inside and outside the temple	Early Dynastic (ED III)
G	<p style="text-align: center;">Inside the temple:</p> <p>G 1 = cella with stone installation</p> <p>-----</p> <p>G 2 = cella with stepped structure</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Outside the temple:</p> <p>Partly renewal or continuous use of rooms of building layer H within the court</p>	Early Dynastic (ED III) to Akkadian Period
GF	<p style="text-align: center;">Inside the temple:</p> <p>Continued use of building level G with one floor elevation inside the cult room</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Outside the temple:</p> <p>GF 1: Older level in the court and the adjacent side rooms at the court</p> <p>-----</p> <p>GF 2: Younger level in the court and the adjacent side rooms at the court</p>	Early Dynastic (ED III) to Akkadian Period
E (+ Floor levels D - C - B)	<p style="text-align: center;">Before the temple building: wall remains</p> <p>-----</p> <p>E 1 = Older building phase of staircase and cella</p> <p>-----</p> <p>E 2 = Younger building phase of staircase and cella = Floor level D in the court</p> <p>-----</p> <p>E 2-C = Floor C in the court</p> <p>-----</p> <p>E 2-B = Floor B in the court</p> <p>-----</p> <p style="text-align: center;">After the use of the temple: graves</p>	Ur III- to Old-Assyrian Period
D (+ Floor level A)	Mudbrick substructions (D) with limestone foundation of the former Šarrat-Nip̄hi temple = Floor level A in the court	Old-Assyrian to Middle-Assyrian Period (1st Half)
Ištar-Aššurītu and Šulmanītu temple	Mudbrick plaster in the court	Middle-Assyrian to Neo-Assyrian Period
Private houses	<p style="text-align: center;">1. Older phase</p> <p>-----</p> <p style="text-align: center;">2. Younger phase</p>	Neo-Assyrian Period (2nd Half)
Nabu temple	Mudbrick foundation	Neo-Assyrian Period (End)
Private houses	Stone foundations	Parthian / Islamic
Mound surface	Layers of sediment and soil	Modern