

NIPPUR

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In what was most probably my last trip to Iraq, in September of 2018, I went to Baghdad to consult with the officials of the State Board of Antiquities to assure them that the Nippur expedition was continuing after a long pause, and that the five-year plan I had submitted in 2017 would be honored. Although we continued to pay the guards and do repairs on the expedition house, we had not been able to work at the site since 1990. The Kuwait Crisis, the Gulf War of 1991, and the continuation of sanctions throughout the '90s meant that we could not resume work. I had deposited several trunks of books, equipment, and surveying instruments with a friend in Baghdad in 1993, but we had left tables, chairs, storage shelves, digging equipment, wheelbarrows, and other items in the house. It was clear, when I visited in about 2012, that most of these things had gradually disappeared, despite having not only our guards but also government guards residing on the site.

It became possible for foreign archaeologists to work in the north of Iraq after 2007, but the security situation in the south, especially given the existence of ISIS, did not allow us to return to Nippur. I wrote for permission to return in 2014, but was advised to wait. Finally, in 2017 we had the first glimmer of a green light. But, the condition of the expedition house was such that a lot of repair was necessary, so in that year, I made a contract with a local builder (who years earlier had been one of our expert diggers) to rejuvenate the house. In September 2018, I went to Nippur to inspect the work and found that there were still major repairs to be done. For a minute, I thought that some of our equipment had not been lost from the house. But, I then found that five rooms of the house were being used as storage for equipment of Iraqi teams that were working in the general area. Given the fact that we proposed to return to work at Nippur later in the fall, I asked that this equipment be removed. And I made a new contract with the same builder to complete the renovations so that the expedition could come in to use it.

Then, having decided to retire as of January 1, 2019, I turned over the excavations at Nippur to Abbas Alizadeh, who went in ahead of his group to buy furniture and equipment once more. He details his work of the new season at Nippur elsewhere in this publication. I continue to work on the manuscripts that will become final reports on the excavations I carried out at Nippur, and I hope to complete them in about three years.

The other site that I am working to publish is Umm al-Hafriyat, a site about 30 km east of Nippur that I dug in 1977. Bob Adams, returning to Nippur one afternoon in 1973, at the end of his survey season and just as we were beginning our work, reported finding “the biggest damned Akkadian site” he had ever seen and that it was full of looter holes. Given my keen interest in the Akkadian period (2350–2200 BC), I decided to visit it soon, and although Adams had not been able to put a name on the site, he said that the driver, Jabbar Nasser, would know which one it was if I described it. When I mentioned the looting, Jabbar immediately said “Oh, umm al-hafriyat” or “mother of holes.” On a Friday, which is a day off in Iraq, we drove out over the desert to the east of Nippur and reached the site in about a half hour. One part of the site was being badly damaged by looters, with whole pottery vessels and even metal tools thrown out along with bones, obviously from graves. I went to Baghdad the next week and asked permission from the State Board of Antiquities to do a salvage dig the next year, to save it from further looting. They, however, wanted me to continue at Nippur. I kept going

back to see the continued looting, and each year I asked for permission once again. Finally, in 1977, they granted the permission. We bought tents in Chicago, and when I got to Baghdad, I had tentmakers create five more. We hauled a truckload of tents and equipment and twenty-five workmen out to the site and excavated from October 8 until December 12, 1977. Our intention to return for another season in 1978 was impossible due to the obligation to work in the Hamrin Dam Salvage project for two years. We never had the opportunity to return. Again, each year thereafter, I visited the site and saw a bit more looting each time. My final view of Umm al-Hafriyat was from a U.S. Navy helicopter in May 2003 as part of a quick tour of sites in southern Iraq to assess the condition of major sites. In that visit to Umm al-Hafriyat in 2003, it was clear that there was no active digging going on, although the entire site was riddled with holes. It was apparent that these holes were made during the 1990s, when the State Board of Antiquities could not police the sites. During that helicopter tour, at each of the other sites, such as Adab, Umma, Umm al-Aqarib, and Isin, we counted as many as two hundred men at work. It was months later that the digging was halted at most sites.

Our one season at Umm al-Hafriyat yielded some surprises. It was not the biggest Akkadian site ever seen, but was in fact a relatively modest town that moved its location several times. The illusory size of the Akkadian occupation, like those of later periods there, was the result of the fact that strewn over the plain were at least four hundred pottery kilns, almost half of which were Akkadian in date. Richard Zettler, with Jill Carlotta Maher, conducted an intensive pickup of sherds on the surface, which showed the general pattern of kilns and over-fired wasters around them. They also established that there were as many kilns datable to the Ur III and Isin-Larsa periods (2100–1900 BC), and that there was even a brick kiln of the Ur III period. In addition, there were in one area of the site two small villages of the Kassite (ca. 1300 BC) and Seleucid (ca. 250 BC) periods, with a few kilns of their own. It seems that the inhabitants of the town shifted their houses when the buildup of ashes in the streets and courtyards became a nuisance. The inhabitants put up with the ash probably because of the exceedingly fine quality of the clay at the site that made it a locus for pottery making. In the 1980s, we were able to take out equipment and map in each of the kilns precisely and date them by the pottery at each one.

I have been putting off the publication of this site for far too long, but now I am actively working on it. Richard L. Zettler and James Armstrong, former students and members of the expedition who supervised the major operations at the site, are working with me to get it done. John Sanders, the Nippur architect, has done detailed plans of the site, and his wife Peggy Sanders as well as Augusta McMahan (then a student) prepared expert drawings of the important objects found. Patti Deres was the photographer for the project, and her husband John Mooney kept records. Stephen Lintner was the geomorphologist, taking soil samples and working to establish an environmental picture through time. Of great importance in the group were Hussein Ali Hamza and Daniel Ishak, the representatives of the State Board of Antiquities, who facilitated our living in the desert. Also important were Jabbar Nasser, the driver, who kept us supplied; Muhammad Jodah, the major domo; and the cook, Muhammad Abid, and his assistant, Karim Abdullah; as well as the twenty-five Iraqi men who did the excavating.

This publication will be important because of the information it gives on the history of environmental change through six thousand years, plus the contribution it makes to our understanding of chronology. And there are very fine cylinder seals and other objects to add to the artifactual record. Perhaps, most important, our work gives a view of a town carrying out an industrial operation, pottery making, that is rarely possible to view in Mesopotamia.

I wish to express my gratitude to all those who, in the past, have encouraged our work and have given, financially, to support it. The Institute's fieldwork depends in great part on the generosity of such supporters.