

NIPPUR EXCAVATIONS

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The ISAC excavations at Nippur, Iraq, took place from January to March 2025. After the abrupt and early end to our 2024 excavations (see the 2023–24 annual report), we were grateful and relieved to have a full season without incident. The team included colleagues from the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, University of Chicago, University of Pennsylvania, Autonomous University of Madrid, and University of Winnipeg, as well as students from the University of Chicago and University of Cambridge.

Our research questions scrutinize the nature of the urban edge zone and its changing functions and population over time. Thus our excavations were located in the southern portion of the site adjacent to the city wall. This southern area was occupied only episodically as the city expanded and contracted in response to political and climatic changes. As a result, the mound is much lower and physically less complex in this area; it was also excavated only occasionally in the 1970s and 1980s and does not have obtrusive soil dumps and deep holes like those left on the main mounds by the early nineteenth-century excavations. This situation allows us to examine very clear “slices” of the site’s history, notably the late third-millennium BCE Ur III period, the mid- to late second-millennium BCE Kassite period, and the early first-millennium BCE Neo-Assyrian or Neo-Babylonian period. In each of these periods, Nippur was the target of conscious re-occupation or revitalization grounded in royally commissioned construction on the Enlil temple and zigzagrat and other important religious buildings, such as the Inanna temple. Simultaneously with these royal projects, the city expanded in size, and we propose that this expansion occurred because residents were internally displaced by temple construction, administrators and other residents seized the opportunity afforded by social mobility to build grander houses, and migrants seeking employment opportunities arrived from the surrounding region. These diverse groups may have moved into the edge area of the southern city in each period, creating neighborhoods of different densities and degrees of wealth. However, in times of political disruption and climatic change, this southern area was the first to be abandoned as the population moved away or perhaps shifted to more easily defended areas on the main mounds.

Our 2025 excavations concentrated on two sets of trenches in the southern area, one along the city wall and a second just inside it (fig. 1). The city wall trenches (WC-4/6) targeted the long, linear mound that represents the eroded remains of the city wall; we were able to expose the Kassite-period city wall just below the surface. This wall was approximately 3 m wide and preserved up to 1.5 m high, and it was constructed of regular courses of mudbrick. It made a zigzag in the area of our trench in order to cross over an earlier erosion channel that may date to the early second millennium BCE (fig. 2). The wall of a Kassite building, perhaps a large house, lies immediately to the east of the city wall on the other side of an intervening space about 4.5 m wide—possibly a street running along the interior of the wall.

There were also some substantial structures outside the city wall, to its west, between the city wall and the edge of a large watercourse that parallels it. These structures had mudbrick walls on baked-brick foundations and were adjacent to a series of bread ovens (*tannurs*). Previous excavations in the 1970s and 1980s and magnetic gradiometry in 2025 in the area west of the wall (see below) suggest that the watercourse was up to 50 m wide; thus it would have been useful for transporting goods and people, as well as for irrigation. The structures outside the city wall (visible in the upper right corner of the trench in fig. 2, with team members standing at the approximate edge of the watercourse) may therefore relate to shipping or market functions. In future seasons, we hope to examine these structures more extensively and to take geological

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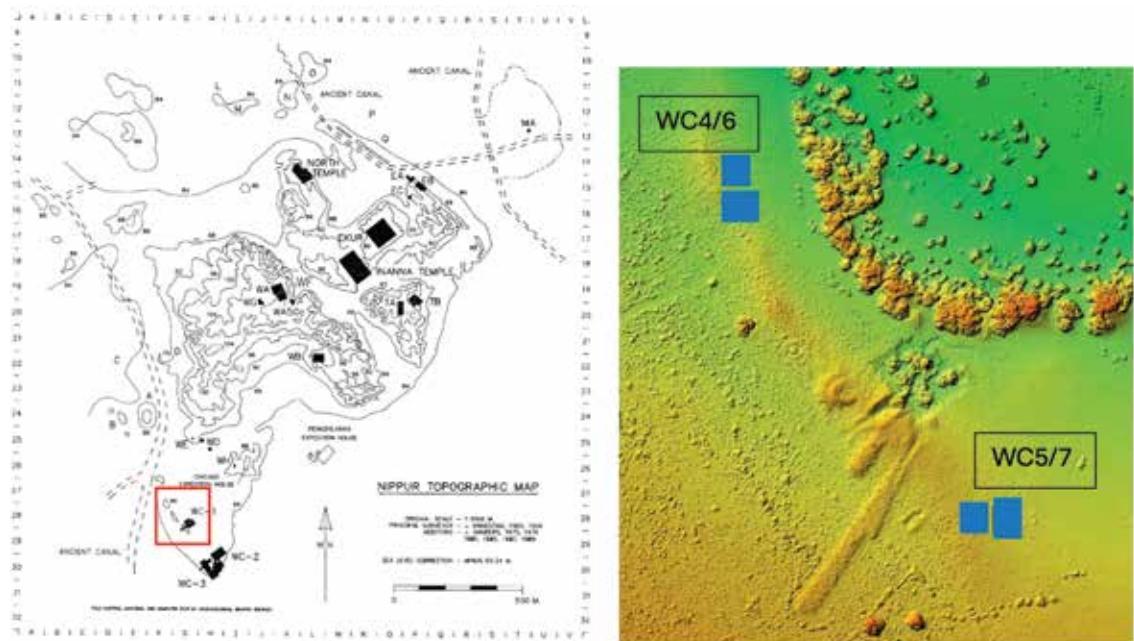


Figure 1. Topographic plan of Nippur with 2025 excavation trenches indicated.

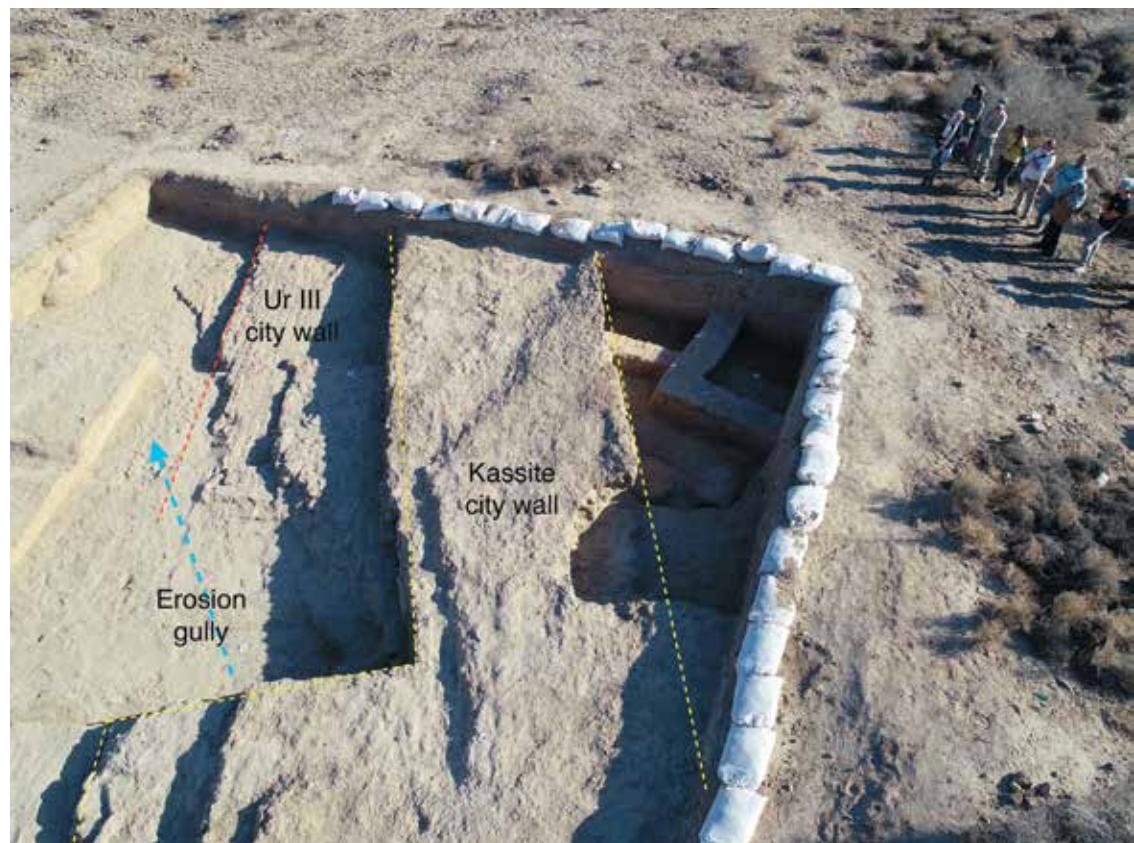


Figure 2. Area WC-4/6, facing south, with Kassite and Ur III city walls.

samples from the watercourse. The Kassite wall overlapped the Ur III city wall, which lies immediately below it but on a slightly different alignment. The top of the Ur III wall had been deliberately flattened for reuse as the foundation of the Kassite wall. The earlier city wall and any associated structures from the Ur III period will also be targeted in the coming years.

Our second area of excavation lies near the southern corner of the city and just inside the remains of the city wall in this location (WC-5/7). The main structure exposed in this area was a very large first-millennium BCE house. It had four large, rectangular central spaces that can be grouped into two pairs, each pair probably consisting of one roofed and one unroofed space (Rooms 1–2 and Rooms 3–4 in fig. 3). We interpret each of these pairs as consisting of a courtyard and a semipublic gathering space for two equal parts of an extended family (potentially headed by coresidential brothers). These central spaces were surrounded by multiple small rooms. Several graves are associated with the house, including two in “bathtub-shaped” coffins that also contained glazed ceramics (fig. 4). The house’s contents, which included incense burners and evidence of a varied diet involving fish and both domesticated and wild animals, suggest that this house was the home of a wealthy family. Despite expanding our trenches several times during the season, we did not expose the entire house, whose area covers more than 200 m²; the only exterior wall exposed was the western one.

To the west of that exterior wall of the house was a narrow alley and then the first-millennium BCE city wall (see fig. 3). The wall in this area is a complex construction that reused the Kassite city wall. This earlier wall must have been still visible in the seventh century BCE, when occupants returned to this southern area, cleaned up the Kassite wall, and built a second wall on a wide foundation just to its east. The narrow space between the two walls was divided by at least one pisé cross wall, possibly creating a system of casemates.

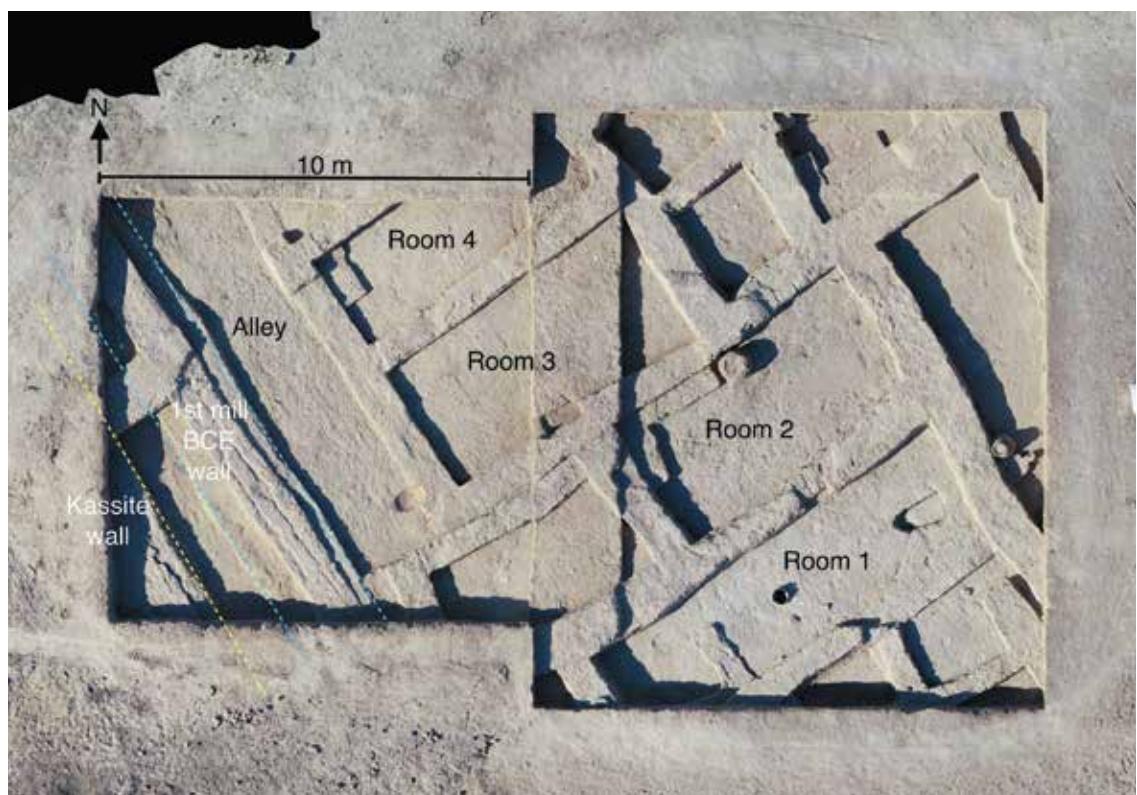


Figure 3. Drone image of Area WC-5/7 first-millennium BCE house and city wall.

The recycling or reuse of an earlier wall is not unusual in Mesopotamian construction practices, but the length of the intervening time—approximately four centuries—implies that significant effort was expended to find, clear, and repair the earlier wall to recreate the same city boundary.

The final use of the southern area was as a cemetery in the Parthian period of the first millennium CE. The Parthian city is located farther east on the main mounds, with the most significant structure being a fortress built around the ziggurat. Parthian houses are located across the West Mound, and a few small mounds covered with Parthian ceramics are scattered near the line of the city wall and just to the north of our new excavations; these small mounds may represent independent villas or farmsteads. The cemetery lies just to the south of them and was used for both adults and children, most of whom were buried with no or only minimal burial offerings, such as small strings of beads or single jars.

Finally, we were able to assess a large, unexcavated part of the southern area by magnetic gradiometry using a Bartington magnetometer borrowed from ISAC's Center for Ancient Middle Eastern Landscapes. This method allowed noninvasive assessment of the underlying architecture in this area. The data are still being processed but allow identification of the alignment of the city wall in the areas between and to the south of our trenches. And as mentioned above, the dimensions of the external western watercourse, approximately 50 m wide, are now clarified.

We thank ISAC for its financial support and all members of the Nippur team for their selfless contributions, through freezing temperatures and occasional rain. We are also very grateful to colleagues of the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage in Baghdad and Diwaniyah for their support.



Figure 4. Glazed pottery from graves in WC-5/7 house.