

The Nippur Expedition

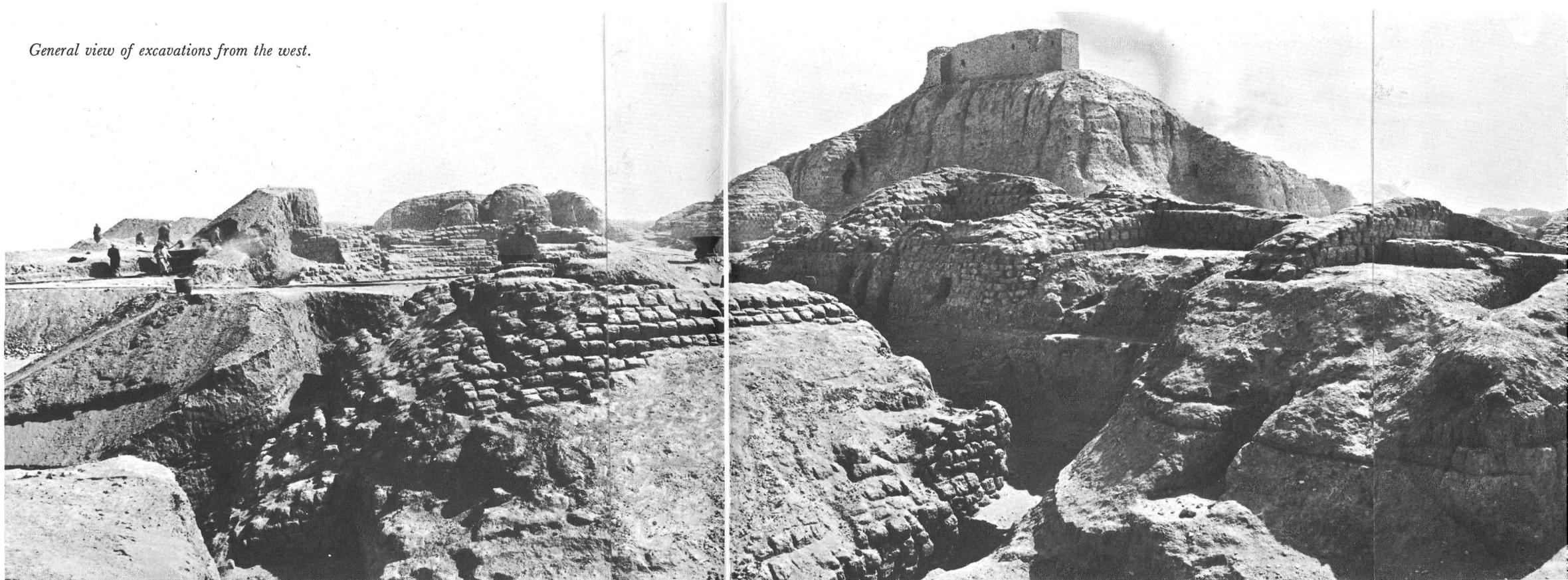
JAMES KNUDSTAD, FIELD DIRECTOR

Perhaps one of the longest seasons of continuous excavation in Mesopotamia in recent years closed in early June at Nippur. We began this, the Oriental Institute's tenth season at the site, in early October of 1966 as the second in a program of two seasons set aside for a concerted attack on the extensive remains of late period occupation still encumbering that monument which has received (and suffered) the brunt of traditional archeological interest at Nippur, the ziggurat and temple complex of Ekur.

The choice of the subject for so much work, admittedly determined in part by its position in the path of continuing interest in the Ekur, was in a

sense a matter of calculated risk. This, as well as the aptness of the term *attack*, might be better appreciated from a look at the field as we first seriously approached it in the season of 1964/65. The contours of Temple Hill at Nippur, crowned as they are by the Ekur ziggurat, were as much the result of slow erosion of massive later construction as they were of deterioration of an ancient shrine perhaps last renewed by Assurbanipal in latest Assyrian times. The later ruins covered an area measuring roughly 500 by 700 feet surrounding the ziggurat and their depth buried nearly half the surviving height of the ziggurat. They had been excavated, recorded, mapped and removed in part by successive expeditions from the University of Pennsylvania (1889–1903) and (occasionally) by those of the University of Chicago (1948–63). Once excavated, they had been subjected to further dismantling and heavy dumping of debris as interest and exploration went deeper. The

General view of excavations from the west.



judgment of the earliest excavators, based on the impulses and techniques of the archeology of seventy-five years ago, was briefly that the ruins comprised a fortress of mud brick utilizing the ziggurat as a citadel and that they could be dated to the Parthian occupation of Mesopotamia.

Against a background of recently increased interest in later historic periods such as the Parthian, uncertainties in the earlier field record as well as obviously unexplored areas in the ground at Nippur led to a reopening of the south quarter of the Parthian ruin in 1964/65. The "fortress" was found to be not one but a succession of three constructions, that is, two major renovations of an original not detected before. Using this information as a key to dig strategy, we proceeded in the season past to reopen virtually all that remained preserved and accessible of Parthian construction in the close vicinity of the ziggurat, following and correcting where we could a published plan of sixty years ago. The season from the outset was to be a long one. We had also learned, in the previous season, that our "archeology" would have to be a curious one, much in the manner of salvage work elsewhere. To follow robber holes is one thing; to rework one's predecessor's excavations with his field notes in hand is another. Problems of interpretation were to be numerous in keeping with the perversities in preservation left to us by the Pennsylvanians as well as the Parthians, and, as anticipated, the yield in stratified and meaningful artifacts was to be understandably less than it can be for fresh ground.

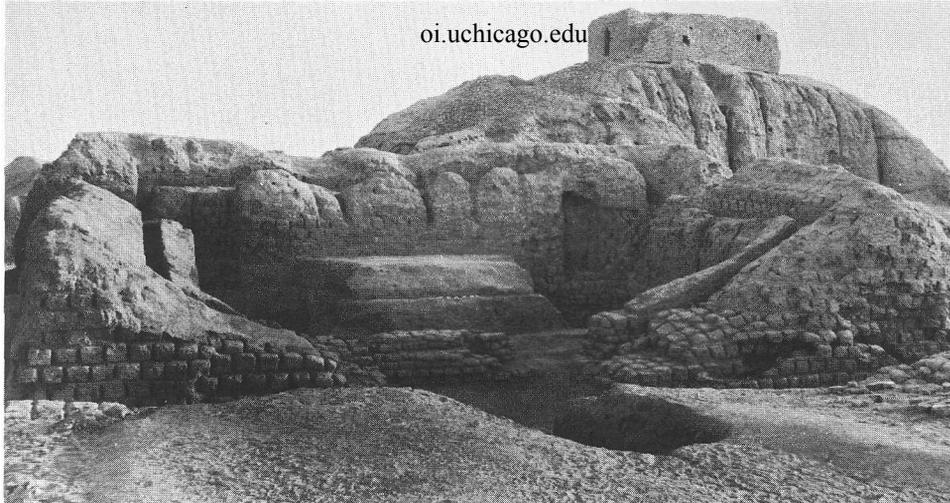
Our first discovery of the past season was that our three-phase theory for the architectural development of the complex was to be a very tricky key indeed. In contrast to the straightforward stack-up of levels found two years earlier in the south, we seemed to be exposing nothing but inconsistency and problematic rebuilding in our explorations and clearance in the north. If in this area what we thought by its character to be phase 1 construction should prove to be that, then subsequent construction above was at the same time founded deeper in many places than was phase 1. More embarrassing than this was our four-month argument with the subsequent construction, which, though clearly jointed and stratigraphically involved, absolutely refused to separate into a second and third phase. Added to this was the dis-



Eroded conditions to northwest of ziggurat showing exposed brickwork of the Ekur enclosure at the bottom, phase 1 outer wall to left above, and phase 3 walls to right and in background.

may be the age of that stratified material which still remained; some 70 per cent of it was undeniably Early Dynastic pottery. Patterns began to emerge only after a great deal of seemingly useless digging. The pottery, so carefully reclaimed floor by floor, had been borrowed by the Parthians with earth fill from outside their walls for the neat renewal of those floors within. Phase 2, perhaps existing only as a change of plan within the bounds of phase 1, had been very nearly obliterated in the construction of phase 3, which had in turn enjoyed an architectural history all its own.

It seems evident to us now, following such lengthy preliminaries, that phase 1 could be described as an initial effort to inclose the ruinous promontory of the ziggurat with a high mud-brick "fortification" wall generally 8 feet thick, about 100 yards to a side, and bearing both square and circular towers on its exterior. A gateway, perhaps not original, was found midway in the length of the northwest wall. The position and alignment of this wall squarely upon that of the ruinous Ekur inclosure walls were probably no accident. We have much evidence as well for a further fortification in the form of a high exterior terrace or rampart faced with baked brick which may have surrounded the wall and repeated its perimeter line of alternate straight faces and protruding towers. Within this inclosure and upon a leveled fill between it and the ziggurat the impressions of numerous reed *sarifa* dwellings were found, particularly in the south quarter, which suggest initial efforts to house a garrison. Their use seems to have been brief, for upon a thin accumulation of debris among them an organized arrangement of streets, corridors, and apartments was erected in mud brick to form much of the plan encountered seventy-five years ago and that level which we now consider as the second architectural phase. A heavy refacing of the ziggurat adding great buttresses to all four sides may have coincided with phase 2, as did major rebuilding of portions of the phase 1 outer wall. There is also evidence in the southwest wall for the possibility of a gateway there, perhaps leading to the Parthian temple found a short distance beyond in an earlier season. The gradual filling of the phase 2 complex with occupational debris helped save much that we have of it, for, upon its abandonment in preparation for phase 3, the builders leveled only portions (essentially on the north side of the ziggurat) that still stood above the new height reached. In over-all area, phase 3 was to become something over three times as large. This required stepping-down the slopes of the mound already amassed and establishing heavier walls to retain an expanded interior based on phase 2 walls and a platform of mud brick. Erosion has been most heavy on this last of great projects on Temple Hill, and as a result much of the interior and any evidence for gates may not have remained for recovery by the earliest excavators. Those parts traced by them and left standing for our exploration were the



Phase 3 large hall with double walls from north, with ziggurat in background.

heavy platform and outer walls, parts of a composition of large halls and corridors in the north quarter, and fragments of yet another refacing of the much altered ziggurat. Of architectural note in phase 3 is the likelihood of preparations for (but apparently no completion of) an *iwan* or three-sided and vaulted reception hall of modest proportions facing an open court in the north quarter. That this might have existed already at Parthian Nippur may prove interesting to the architectural historian.

Finds during the past season were far more encouraging than those of the previous one, although admittedly scanty. A respectable collection of pottery gleaned from all three phases compares well with earlier collections from the Parthian temple (Nippur), Seleucia, and Dura Europus. Differences in type and occurrence between top and bottom levels were slight and only helped to bracket further the Parthian occupation to within the first and second centuries A.D. It should be noted that, wherever explored, phase 1 rested directly on much earlier material, that is, Assyrian, Kassite, or Ur III construction, and that very little if any hints of Seleucid or Sassanian presence were found. A small collection of stratified coins agreed with the pottery on the question of builders and occupants. On the basis of coins, phase 1 cannot have been much earlier than A.D. 82/83. A majority of the coins were minted late in the first or early in the second centuries A.D. In addition, several nice examples of Parthian figurines in bone, stone, and molded clay were found, some in classic motif and others in a simple geometric style. One can regularly pick



View from ziggurat of early clearance to northwest.

Aramaic incantation bowls from the surface of Nippur, and a number of these turned up again. Of much more interest, however, will be a surprising collection of sherds and pots bearing Aramaic texts which were recovered from stratified context within the Parthian complex.

The choice of the term “complex” is a cautionary one. We must still admit to uncertainty concerning the primary function of such a fortified establishment at Nippur. Large portions of the plans for each of the phases remain missing. The form and the function of the predominant feature in the composition of each phase, the ziggurat as altered each time, remain very uncertain. Whether the Parthians were building fort, palace, or shrine, they seem to have created something unique to our knowledge thus far.

Mr. Yasin Mahmoud, representing the Iraqi Department of Antiquities at Nippur, now holds the record there for length of residence with a foreign expedition in the field. Dr. and Mrs. Giorgio Buccellati served as staff epigrapher/photographer and excavation supervisor, respectively. Misses Diane Taylor and Judi Franke also supervised excavation, Diane doubling as epigrapher/archivist and Judi as photographer. Mr. Edward Keall served as staff archeologist, and the writer as architect and field director.