

Excavations at Nippur, 1972/73

McGUIRE GIBSON, *Field Director*

After a pause of five years, the Oriental Institute has resumed excavation at Nippur, the holy city of ancient Mesopotamia. Under a new field director, McGuire Gibson, the Nippur Expedition is envisioned as a long-term operation to be carried out on a yearly basis. It is hoped that a program of investigation will yield information not only about the sacred areas of the site, but also about the city as a whole, its growth and decline, changing patterns of occupancy, and the relationship of the various parts of the city to each other.

In order to begin the projected program, it was decided to turn to the West Mound, the large L-shaped *tell* west of the ancient river bed that divides the city. This mound has never been investigated by the Oriental Institute, which has concentrated on the sacred precinct to the east. The University of Pennsylvania, in its excavations from 1889-1900, did excavate extensively in the southernmost tip of the West Mound and in one area alongside the ancient river. Otherwise, this half of the city seems to have been little disturbed.

A major problem at Nippur is the great burden of Seleucid, Parthian, and Islamic material covering large portions of the site. In order to reach early historical levels, it was decided to concentrate this season on locations from which Pennsylvania had already removed the late material. In one area, below and near a Seleucid "Columned Hall," Pennsylvania had discovered Kassite remains. The period of the Kassites, the latter part of the second millennium B.C., is inadequately known both historically and archaeologically. Any new information on the period would be interesting and important.

The excavation in the area of the Columned Hall, called WA, proved to be very complex. Below the Seleucid levels, which have been almost entirely destroyed, there were houses and one small temple of Achaemenid date. Below the temple was a series of occupational levels with pits cut into them, walls projecting seemingly out of nowhere, and deliberate filling. These remains proved to be various attempts to level and hold debris and keep it from sliding down the slope into the river that ran nearby. Evidence was found of at least three retaining walls, creating a stepped effect on the slope. These walls were associated with a large niched and buttressed Neo-Babylonian building.



Recessed doorway of the Achaemenid temple, with buttressed walls of earlier temples in the background, at Nippur. Photo by McGuire Gibson.

Only an outer wall and a corner of this building could be excavated this season, but enough was exposed to show that the uppermost construction was only the latest in a series of buildings. Versions with similar niching were found below. These were datable to the Old Babylonian, Kassite, and Middle Babylonian periods. In one end of a room, inside the wall, in the Old Babylonian phase, were found several cylinder seals and an inscribed stone axe dedicated to a deity, probably a goddess. This last item indicates that the building was a temple.

In another operation, WA 50c, a small stratigraphic pit was sunk and levels from Seleucid down to Early Dynastic times were exposed. This pit yielded many objects. Of special importance were three medical tablets of Neo-Babylonian date, cylinder seals, and a fine series of glazed-ware potsherds. In one level, associated with a building of plano-convex bricks, usually taken as an indication of Early Dynastic times (ca. 3000–2350 B.C.), were discovered four Old Akkadian tablets, cylinder seals of the same date, and a fragment of a brick stamp of Naram-Sin, a king of the period. It has thus been clearly established that construction with such bricks is as typical for Akkadian (ca. 2350–2200 B.C.) as for the previous period.

In a third operation, called WB, at the southern end of the West Mound, substantial houses of Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian date

were found. These houses produced hundreds of well-stratified potsherds, which should be important for redefining the ceramics of the early second millennium B.C. In one of these houses there was a group of whole pottery vessels, stone mortars and pestles, and other items lying on the floor as they were left. On the same floor there were several cuneiform tablets, including one Sumerian literary text and three dated contracts. These contracts, giving the 34th and 36th years of Hammurabi (1759 and 1757 B.C.) and the 13th year of Samsuiluna (1737 B.C.), indicate about a twenty-year span for the use of this building.

In one low area in the eastern half of Nippur, near the ziggurat, a small pit, SQ, was dug to about three meters depth in order to gather a series of soil samples. Dr. Peter Mahringer, of Washington State University, who was able to join the expedition for one week and take these and other samples, will study the faunal, floral, and pollen evidence in these samples in order to give a picture of climate in the area, possibly as far back as 3500 B.C.

In future seasons, it is hoped that work may continue in WA, the temple area, and in WB, the private houses. It is also hoped to put in trenches in low areas around the mound where potsherds indicate significant early historical material. It is also proposed to investigate the city wall.

The staff for Nippur, 1972/73, was composed largely of graduate students from several universities. Archaeological site supervisors were Charles Smith (Arizona), Curtiss Brennan (Arizona), Juris Zarins (Chicago), Vernon Grubish (Northwestern), and Constance Piesinger (Wisconsin). John Sanders, formerly of Arizona, was the architect. Mrs. Mary Brennan (Arizona) was registrar of objects and was invaluable in a dozen other ways. Miguel Civil, of the Oriental Institute, was the epigrapher and photographer. Mr. Douglas Kennedy, of the Centre nationale de recherche scientifique in Paris, assisted in both archaeological and philological fields. Mr. Adnan Muhsin Jabber served as the representative of the Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities.

The expedition was especially privileged to have on the staff Mr. and Mrs. Richard C. Haines. Mr. Haines, former director at Nippur, was a general consultant and teacher for everyone on the dig. Mrs. Haines managed the house, mended pots, and did many other large and small tasks. Any new director would be lucky to have such people as these to introduce him to his site. It is hoped that they will be able to return in future seasons.