

Nippur under Assyrian Domination: 15th Season of Excavation, 1981–82.

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Nippur, during the seventh century B.C., was controlled by the Assyrians, but was essentially Babylonian in its artifacts and outlook. These were the main conclusions reached after the fifteenth season at the site in southern Iraq.

During the fourteenth season, in the fall of 1976, we had exposed in Area WC some private houses that were rich in glazed pottery and other objects. Lacking any inscribed items to date the houses, we could only estimate from the style of the

artifacts that we were dealing with remains from the earlier half of the first millennium, B.C. The location of these houses, at the southernmost corner of the site, implied that the city was surprisingly large at the time. We have a general impression, from the lack of historical information, that the early first millennium was a time of decline in Babylonia. Our evidence seemed to give a different impression.

Our return to Nippur, to resume excavation on the houses, was delayed until October, 1981, due to salvage work at Umm al-Hafriyat

east of the city, and the Hamrin Basin Project near Baghdad.

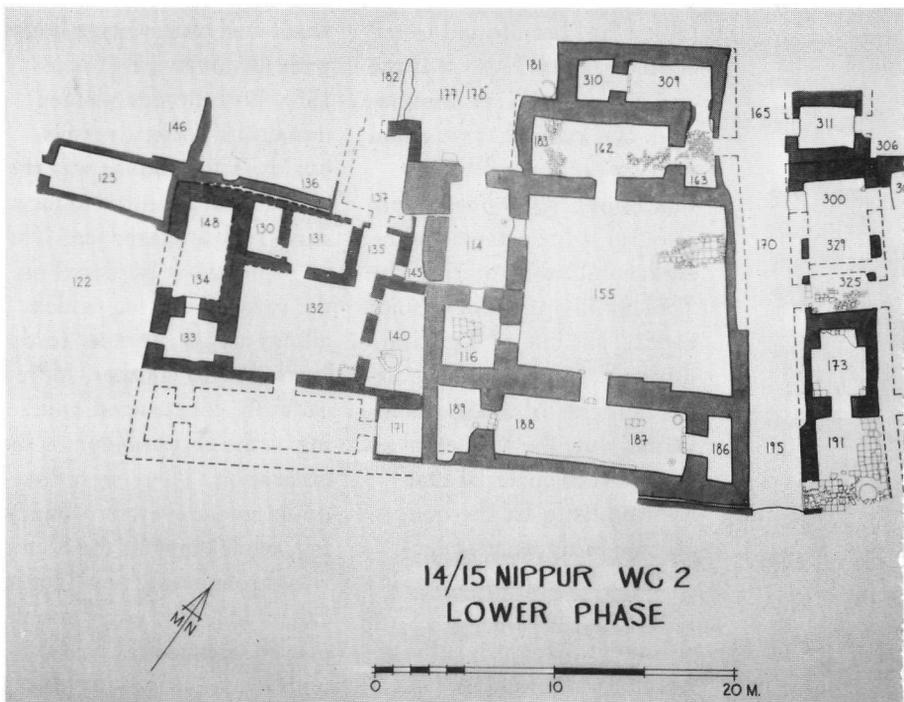
Actual excavation began at the end of November, 1981 and continued to the end of January, 1982. Initially, we planned to expand the area of the houses in WC and to carry out a small investigation on Tablet Hill, a part of the site that has not been touched since the early 1950's. The Tablet Hill operation, a small cut alongside the edge of Trench TA, was intended to check on the stratigraphy of that important area, where a group of tablets had been found to tell of the siege of Nippur at the end of the Assyrian domination. We knew that we could recover pottery related to that in our WC houses, and also put it in sequence with earlier and later material. The Tablet Hill operation was not carried out due to logistical difficulties, mainly the shortage and cost of labor. As it turned out, the WC excavation yielded material that allowed us to fix the houses in time fairly accurately.

The southern corner of the city of Nippur, Area WC, is delimited by a very substantial city wall of Ur III date (c.

2200 B.C.). Lying within this corner, and running over the old wall, are buildings of the Kassite Period (c. 1200 B.C.) and the houses we have referred to as "early first millennium." These houses lie directly under the present mound surface and consist of two levels of construction. About a meter or so down, the lower level was built over earlier constructions as yet undated. Thus far there are exposed two complete houses and parts of two or three others. The house to the west, with a central courtyard (Locus 132), is overshadowed by the larger house with its courtyard (Locus 155). Both houses yielded numerous pottery vessels, but the larger house was the primary location for luxury items such as glazed jars. The larger house is bordered on the east by a street, which allows access not only to the house but to another, more carefully constructed building at the eastern edge of the excavation. There were four doors into the eastern building, while entry to the house was through only one door in Locus 163. The entry room into the house was paved with bricks. It was by this

pavement in Locus 162 that we found a fragmentary tablet with a date in the fourteenth or sixteenth year of the king Shamash-shum-ukin (655 or 653 B.C.). Nearby, was a small clay plaque showing a winged bull, similar in idea to Assyrian bulls, but executed in a more rounded, more delicate manner. From Locus 162, a doorway led to the court. Off this court was a kitchen (Locus 114) and a bath (Locus 116). South of the court was a long room, that we think was a reception

Plan of buildings in WC, Lower phase.



room, with small rooms on either end. In these small rooms we found a number of important objects. The threshold of Locus 189, for instance, had buried in it about thirty-five bits of unworked amethyst, apparently either a treasure hoard or a dedication placed there at the building of the house. The plaster on the lower wall of Locus 168 had hidden in it three cylinder seals, of much older date than the house, clearly treasure. One of the seals was a very fine lapis lazuli cylinder of Akkadian date (c. 2300 B.C.).

The building at the eastern edge of the excavation, with its four entry doors, was clearly unusual. A number of doors on a street calls to mind a row of shops or an establishment with a traffic flow very different from that of a house. There are other features that set this building apart from house architecture. Locus 191 was the remnant of a courtyard with a well-laid pavement of baked bricks. In this court was a well that had been later re-used as a drain. The court gave access to an oddly shaped room, Locus 173, with a niche on the back wall.

The plaster on the walls was especially thick and well applied. At some time in the life of the building, a renovation was carried out and this room was completely filled in with three courses of mud brick laid in mud mortar. Scattered in the mortar we found dozens of objects, including a fragmentary carnelian cylinder with the beginning of an inscription dedicating the object to a god. There were several cylinder seals of various ages, including some of fayence that may be fairly contemporary with the building. There were also a number of copper and iron tools and weapons. Outside, in the courtyard, under one of the baked bricks we found another cylinder seal. We are fairly confident that the small room was a shrine.

There seems to have been a pause in the use of all the buildings in the WC area, if we may judge by an accumulation of sand in the courtyards of the houses. Then, after having knocked down the upper parts of the walls, new houses were constructed on the stubs. Some of the spaces were subdivided, for instance the courtyard of the largest house. The shrine



*Baked clay plaque, winged bull
from Locus 162. Actual size c. 7.5
cm. high.*

building underwent some changes as did the street adjacent to it. A well-constructed baked brick drain was laid down the middle of the street to take the water from the courtyards of all the buildings.

The pottery from the upper level of buildings was much the same as that found below, with some differences in types. More glazed wares were found in the upper level than in the lower. The other objects were as interesting or

more interesting than those below. In the debris above the shrine building were found a baked clay plaque of Ishtar stepping on a lion and a baked clay mold for the making of bronze (?) plaques. The mold shows a man wearing a conical helmet and holding a staff. The staff is decorated with six balls and a long tassel. The details and style of the figure seem closest associated with Babylonian kings such as Mero-dach Baladan, who ruled in



Baked clay plaque, goddess Ishtar holding bow and arrows, and stepping on a lion's back. Actual size c. 11.5 cm. high.

the eighth century. The mold may be a relic from this or an earlier Babylonian king, but it might also be a depiction of Shamash-shum-ukin in Babylonian style. This king was an Assyrian, the brother of King Ashurbanipal of Assyria, and had been put on the throne of Babylonia by their father Esarhaddon. Shamash-shum-ukin became the focus for a major revolt against Assyria. After putting down the revolt and eliminating his brother, Ashurbanipal took on the direct rule of Babylonia in 647.

At present, we would suggest that the lower level of houses in WC is datable to the reign of Shamash-shum-ukin; the pause marked by sand might reflect the end of his reign; and the reconstruction of the upper phase might be from the reign of Ashurbanipal. A few meters south of the WC houses, we encountered a city wall about five meters wide running along the top of the Ur III city wall. This late city wall is contemporary with the upper level of houses. We have no documentary evidence on the building of this city wall, but I would suggest

that it was done during the reign of Ashurbanipal, after the revolt, when he carried out major building projects at Nippur such as the refacing of the ziggurat. It was in this time that Nippur became a relatively strong supporter of Assyrian interests in Babylonia and thus was a center of resistance to the Chaldean forces that eventually rose to form the Neo-Babylonian empire. The late city wall may have been part of the defenses during the siege of the city by the Chaldeans. This siege was so intense that people began to sell their children in order to buy food. That particular siege was lifted, but Nippur later joined the Neo-Babylonian camp. The city was never again to stretch as far as it had during the seventh century. Above the ruins of the WC houses there are no Neo-Babylonian remains, only a few stray graves.

The objects from WC show some influence from Assyria, but the style is clearly Babylonian. The fayence cylinder seals will help to fill a gap in knowledge about Babylonian style during the early first millennium. Likewise, the clay

plaques add significantly to the group of reliefs that can be called Babylonian from that time. The pottery, especially the glazed items, although related in shape and design elements to Assyrian

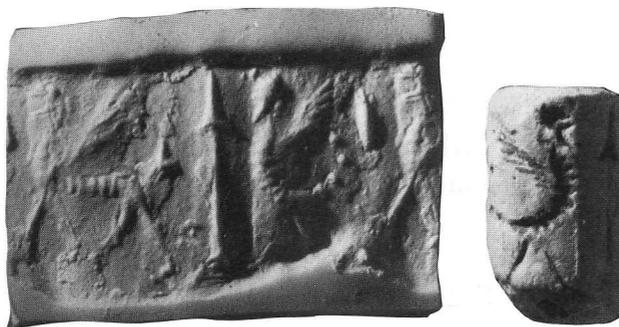


Baked clay mold for making figurines of a king. From debris above building with shrine. Actual size c. 18.5 cm. high.

pieces, is clearly locally produced. The glazes have already been analyzed and are markedly different in composition from Assyrian examples.

The relationship of Nippur to Babylonia as a whole in the turbulent first millennium and to Assyria in the seventh century is just beginning to

Frit seal, showing winged lion and scorpion-man. From plaster on wall of Locus 186. Size 2.4 cm. high.



be understood by historians. Our archaeological evidence helps to flesh out the picture.

No account of an archaeological season would be complete without an acknowledgment of the staff who carried out the work and the interested members who supported the research. John Sanders was, as usual, the architect. James A. Armstrong was Assistant Director and chief field supervisor. Peggy May Bruce was photographer and draftsman. John M. Rus-

sell was field supervisor and registrar. Janet Russell was assistant registrar. Beverly M. Armstrong was house manager, general assistant, and center of good sense. A great debt is owed to her, Peggy Bruce and Janet Russell, who took on the functions of the cook when he quit and could not be replaced.

We must also acknowledge our debt to Muhammad Yahya, the representative of the Organization of Antiq-

unities, who performed more than normal duties in a time of personal concern. We would also like to express our thanks to Dr. Moayyad Sa'ld, President of the Organization for his permission to do the work, and to Dr. Abd-as-Sittar al-'Azzawi, the Director of the Southern Region, for his interest, enthusiasm, and aid.

Lastly, we should thank

the Friends of Nippur for once again donating extra funds to make the work possible. A good part of this funding went to support John Sanders, whose presence on the dig and whose continuing work on plans here in the States makes it possible to publish much more consistently than most expeditions are able to do.