



# News & Notes

No. 99 May-June 1985

*Issued confidentially to members and friends  
Not for publication*

## WINTER IN IRAQ: NIPPUR ONE MORE TIME

LETTERS from McGuire Gibson

Baghdad, Iraq  
January 25, 1985

In a great rush, the 16th season at Nippur has begun. I am here in Baghdad going through the normal steps to finish the permissions, arrange transportation, open the dig house, and hire workmen. The rest of the crew is flying in at the end of January, loaded down with equipment, chili powder, soy sauce and all the other necessities for a successful season.

The flight over was wonderful: SAS from Chicago to Copenhagen, with the movie "Pharlap", about an Australian horse; a long enough lay-over in Copenhagen to allow me to go into the city and see friends for a short time; then a smooth flight on Iraqi Airways to Baghdad. The entire trip was restful, since neither plane was very full and I could lie down and sleep.

The new airport in Baghdad works very efficiently. I was through customs and passport control in about ten minutes. On the plane, I had the company of Mr. K. Erle, the Dane who used to be manager of the Monberg-Thorsen construction company in Baghdad. It was Mr. Erle who made us so welcome in the M-T house during our joint project with Copenhagen in 1978-79. If it had not been for M-T and another Danish company, F. L. Schmidt, we would have been sleeping in the streets in those years, when Baghdad was full of foreign companies and all hotels were booked months in advance. I should not forget, however, that Ryan Crocker, the commercial attache of the American Interests Section, and his family gave us a great deal of help and let us stay with them several times. Mr. Erle was being met by another of our Danish friends, Leif Christensen, who gave me a lift to my hotel.

The drive in from the airport was somewhat bewildering. I was last here two years ago for a short visit. Since then, much of the construction of roads, bridges, interchanges, and buildings has been completed and at night I had little idea where we were exactly. By day, it is easy enough to see where the new roads parallel or even run on the old routes.

Several of the large, luxury hotels are now open. Added to the Sheraton, Meridien, and Novotel are the Rashid, and the Babylon. The last one, the Babylon, is designed to look



*Baked clay model ziggurat, probably a toy.*

like a ziggurat. It lies on the river, bordered by palm trees and private houses and is probably the most beautifully situated of the new hotels. It is, however, also the farthest from shopping, cinemas, and so forth. But there are plenty of taxis to get you anywhere.

Some parts of Baghdad are relatively unchanged. Sadoun Street, the main commercial street, with most of the airline offices, the cinemas and hotels, is pretty much the same. This is because the grand plan to raze and rebuild this district has been put on hold for now. Sadoun Street is a creation of the 50's and 60's, and thus has none of the charm of the old city. The redevelopment plans will link the commercial strip with some older houses nearer the Tigris and with a riverfront that will reemphasize the Baghdadi's love of the river. As in the past and the present, the new riverfront will have restaurants, gardens, and amusements.

Rashid Street, the older commercial street made familiar in Agatha Christie novels, is virtually the same. Some of the buildings and the markets will be preserved when this area is developed. There are some new high-rise buildings near the banking district, and there is a new bridge that splits Rashid Street just south of the old Customs House, which



*The 16 Nippur dig crew in front of the new gates of the house. On the left, Nur, the guard, like Sarah Bernhardt, makes yet another appearance despite retirement. In front row also, Sayyid Muhammad Yehya, Maggie*

*Brandt, Muhammad Jodah. In rear, Jim Armstrong, Beverly Armstrong, Bob Biggs, McGuire Gibson, John Sanders, Stephen Lintner not shown.*

houses the Ethnographic Museum. East of Rashid Street, the oldest parts of Baghdad have been the location of major projects. Here, mosques and old houses have been saved, while some buildings of little historical interest have been demolished and replaced with new structures done in a style that fits in with the old buildings.

On the west side of the river, a whole street of new high-rise apartments (8-10 stories) is nearing completion. This street was demolished in about six months' time three years ago, except for significant buildings of the Ottoman period. There is, for instance, one elegant house with its entire upper story built of patterned woodwork. This house is one of several protected landmarks.

The *sugs* are much the same. I went through to remake acquaintances with the rug dealers. The memory of these men is remarkable. They can remember the price of rugs I bought ten years ago.

I've just returned from a day at Nippur. Nur, the guard, is well enough, considering that he is in his eighties and is supposed to have retired officially two years ago. The house and all the equipment are as we left them, with the exception of the south wall of the building which needs some new

plaster. There has been a good bit of rain this year, but none for a few weeks. It is unusually warm for January, a pleasant 70 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and in the 40's at night. This is perfect digging weather and I hope it holds for the two months we are here. The farmers, like farmers everywhere, want more rain, of course.

It looks as if we will have enough men to do the work. The war has been in pretty much of a lull for some months and workmen are available. The slackening of construction has meant a lowering of wages in general and this means we will be able to afford more men than we thought.

Our season will be a short one, since we have gotten started later than normal and will stop before the end of March. (I have to get back for Spring Quarter.) We will be concentrating on Tablet Hill, an area that was excavated by Penn in the 1890's and again by Chicago in the 1950's. We want to recheck the stratigraphy that was published by McCown and Haines in *Nippur I* and see how our recent work at WC fits into that key sequence. Jim Armstrong is doing a dissertation on the 7th Century B.C. level at WC and is trying to tie his pottery and other artifacts into the other Nippur finds from that time.

When we say "Tablet Hill" cuneiformists give us hopeful glances. It was here that a great number of Sumerian tablets was found, including literary compositions. It was also here that a famous group of tablets, published as the Siege Documents, was discovered in the early 50's. These documents were used by A. Leo Oppenheim to reveal a fearful story of a city encircled, a famine and a selling of children for survival. The siege in question was at the end of the 7th Century B.C., when Nippur was a stronghold of the Assyrians against an army of Babylonians, who were beginning to assert themselves once again as a power. Sometime after the siege was lifted, the Assyrian state was conquered by Elamites and Babylonians and Babylon once again ruled Mesopotamia. This situation is only one of the things that may be dealt with in our current season. In my next report, I will be able to give concrete details. For now, we are only framing questions to be answered. As often happens, we may well find answers to questions unthought of and yet not be able to solve some puzzles we began with.

While at Nippur, we will be laying out a plan for the next five years. That plan will depend in part on a detailed collection of the surface sherds we will be carrying out this season. We have before tried to determine what lies below parts of Nippur from examining the sherds found on the surface. A site as long-occupied and as complex as Nippur has a lot of early material dislocated by later builders, such as the Parthians. Thus, in many parts of the tell the surface sherds might convince you that there was prehistoric settlement (Ubaid, c. 4500 B.C.) where there probably was

none. In other places, on the lower parts of the site, however, surface sherds do reflect accurately what is under the ground.

This report is being carried to Europe for posting so it should reach Chicago in time for the February 1st deadline for the March-April issue of News and Notes. [EDITOR'S NOTE: *It Didn't!*] I will send another in about a month to report on progress.

## Nippur Iraq March 6, 1985

Our 16th season is better than half over and it looked as if this was going to be the first season in which we did not find tablets. But today in a fragment of floor left in a house that had been partly excavated by Chicago in the early 1950's, we found a small, perfectly preserved tablet. Bob Biggs can read enough of it even before it is baked and cleaned to say that it is probably seventh century B. C. in date and is a letter. We found the tablet just before lunch and after our return to the mound a boy gave us another one. This second tablet was half of an early Old Babylonian letter (c. 1900 B.C.) that had been baked in antiquity. The boy was eating his lunch on one of the old dumps and saw something he thought was a bar of soap. He took it to the foreman who told him what it was. Having been showered with two tablets in less than two hours, we waited for more, but the rest of the day yielded only pot sherds, animal bones, and the first gnats of the year.

These tablets have given Bob some of his own work to do. Thus far, he has been doing conservation, pot-mending, coin identification, site supervision, driving to the market in Afej, entertaining visitors and cooking rice. We know from previous experience that when there is an Assyriologist on the site the tablets hide. Usually they lurk in the baulks left between squares. We have been urging Bob to go to Baghdad to finish some work he started there. He is leaving tomorrow for a few days. He will travel in a car sent by the Iraqi Foreign Ministry which is coming to collect Mrs. Marney Akins, who has been with us for more than a week. She and her husband, Jim, former Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, are old Iraqi hands and long-time friends of the expedition. On the only day that Jim could spend with us, we went to the neighboring site of Isin, which a German expedition has been digging for about ten years. After Jim left for a business trip farther east, Marney stayed on for two weeks to mend pots, draw sherds and make a surface collection of the mound, concentrating on the Islamic period. A surface collection is much easier now than previously. The sand is moving off much of the mound at an increasing rate and the surface is truly visible for the first time. There are still some big dunes, especially on the East Mound around the ziggurat, but the West Mound is easily workable for the first time since Penn left it in 1900. In five years the entire mound should be free of sand.



*A small glazed bottle with its stopper in place. The glaze is in yellow, green and white. From a burial, 7th Century B.C.*

One of the surprises revealed by the shift of sand has been the appearance of a low, large Islamic site a hundred and fifty meters northeast of the city. This site, in effect a late occupation at Nippur, is 14th Century A.D. in date and the pottery on the surface is in elaborate blue, black, and white glazes, unusually beautiful. We may have to do something on this site fairly soon. It is so low that new irrigation could turn it into fields in a very short time.

The 14th Century site was brought to our attention by Maggie Brandt's investigations on canals and natural conditions on the north and east sides of the city. Maggie, an archaeologist who is also specializing in geomorphology, came back to the house on the second day talking about a large Islamic site with lots of blue pottery. From her initial description, that also included mention of four canal beds and a big rock, I thought she had walked a mile or so away from the city. Only when I went out with her and saw that she was describing the situation almost within the shadow of the ziggurat, and collected some of the pottery did I understand that the dune movement had given us a wonderful opportunity to examine in detail a number of ancient canals and a rich site of an Islamic date not suspected to be here. All other nearby Islamic sites are 7th to 12th Centuries A.D. This 14th Century one sits on a canal that came down from the northwest, cut through the city wall at its northern corner, then passed out through the northeast wall, sliced through an Abbasid canal (c. 10th Century A.D., perhaps), fed the site in question, and then

turned south. John Sanders and Maggie mapped the canals and the site and have laid out a 200 meter long trench that we will cut with a machine that is available for hire. The trench will cut through the canals and give information on sediments, climate, amount of water carried, and other things. We hope that by the time we get the canals cut Stephen Lintner will be here to help record them. Lintner, you may remember, spent several seasons with us doing geomorphological and environmental studies. Maggie is following up on his work and is even processing his soil samples for her own use. She will use this material for her dissertation on the ancient irrigation system in Mesopotamia.

Our work this year is concentrated on one of the few places where sand still makes digging very difficult. You may, justifiably, wonder why we are again on Tablet Hill, the southernmost part of the East Mound, when much of the site is now pleasant and easy to work on. We do have a sensible reason. During the past three seasons, we have been learning a great deal about the 7th Century B.C., when the Assyrians held Babylonia and eventually made Nippur their key stronghold. In the place we have been working, Area WC, there is nothing later than the 7th Century and there is a gap in occupation under the buildings of that time. In order to place our 7th Century material in a good sequence, and to help put the known sequence in better order, we decided to put in a new operation at the south end of Trench TA, dug by Donald McCown and Carl

*Area TC from the southeast, with Trench TA filled with sand on the right. The boy in the center of the picture is carrying a wooden box over his head. The box is stood on when we want to photograph architectural features.*





*View of Area TC from the northwest at end of season. 7th Century walls being mapped by Jim Armstrong. In the background, the debris within an old Pennsylvania trench and some of the fill under Carl Haines' railroad lines has been eaten away by the wind and has collapsed into the excavation.*

Haines from 1948 to 1952. Here, we knew from their report that we would find the proper sandwich of periods for our WC material. We also thought that with our limited staff and time we would be able to do only a small pit during the season and the new operation on Tablet Hill seemed admirably suited to give the greatest information with the smallest effort. As it turned out, we have made a much larger trench than we thought we could.

Our trench, called TC, came down almost immediately on walls and floors of the 7th Century. Penn had been here before us and had sliced away the later levels, then carried their trench down through the Kassite and into the Old

Babylonian (c. 1800 B.C.). This meant that we could, by removing the sand and debris from the Penn trench, create something of a step trench very quickly. We decided that, in order to gain the post-7th Century levels, we should expand the operation to the west, thus creating a 20 x 10 meter trench. In the western part, we found the later material, but it consisted mostly of ash layers in a large ancient pit that came down to and cut the 7th Century building in places. After excavating parts of the ash layers very carefully and collecting the artifacts systematically, we decided that we had enough of a sample of the ash pits and then began to take out the ashes very quickly. We have, thus, been able to expose and dig several rooms and a courtyard of a large, impressively plastered house of the 7th Century, with earlier levels going into the 8th and probably preceding centuries. In short, with our operation we have gained the sandwich of periods we were seeking. We have also been able to sample the Kassite and Old Babylonian levels once again and can compare our new findings with those of the earlier excavators.

This has been a more social season than any I remember. The site is visited often by various Iraqi and foreign groups. There is a Bulgarian agricultural project nearby and the engineers have been here twice. Old friends from Baghdad came for the weekend and brought with them a mountain of Iraqi food, which was much appreciated. The American Chargé, David Newton, and his wife came by on a trip back from Kuwait. Their son, Mark, has been spending some time with us.

It has been unusually cold much later than normal this year. But our three or four nights of below-freezing temperatures and the days that routinely reach the 80's must seem tropical to you at home, if the sketchy news reports are any indication.

This is the season when things finally gave out. When a house at the edge of the desert is left unoccupied for three years, sand seeps into everything and it takes a couple of weeks to sort things out. We made a major repair on the refrigerator, which is only five years old. The wooden gates, which were put on the house twenty-one years ago and have been repaired numerous times, finally collapsed. We have installed steel gates, painted by Bob Biggs a rusty red. We have also had to replace the kerosene water heater that has worked since 1948. This year, when Muhammad started it, great bangs and grinds came forth. Nur proposed that a snake had gotten into the tank and the heat had awakened it. When the tank was taken apart, no parboiled snake was found, only destroyed coils. A new electric water heater has gone in and we luxuriate in hot water, as long as the government tanker truck comes on the appointed day to fill our tanks. The local officials have been very helpful, as always, and we have had little difficulty.

All these things are minor troubles considering the great digging situation we have. We are not in tents, we have running water and electricity, and labor is sufficient. But we do have sandstorms on the *tell* even when all around us is clear and calm. We come back to the house covered in dust, looking like coal miners. We look forward to future seasons after the sand has blown itself away.

## Baghdad Airport March 29, 1985

I'm on the "other side" of Passport Control, waiting for the Iraqi Airlines flight to take me to London. All the other staff members left days ago, each one loaded with notes, soil samples, books, and equipment.

We stopped work on the mound by March 19 and spent the next few days photographing and drawing objects and pottery, cleaning up the dig for final photos, and packing away the house. Maggie left before the rest of us on the 20th. That morning I asked her what the weather would be like, she being the person making climatic notes. She announced that the weather had been "dismantled," meaning that her mini-station on the roof had been packed away. She did a great job of creating weather. We lost not one day because of rain and I attribute that to Maggie's rooftop rituals.

For the last week at the site, the news reports were full of the great victory Iraq has had in the marshes. At Nippur and in Baghdad the mood has been jubilant.

The trip to Baghdad from the site was more exciting than it need have been. We left Nippur in clear weather at about 3 one afternoon, only to find gray, rolling clouds running west and north of us all the way up the road. Hollywood-style lightning and high wind stayed in front of us for the last fifty miles. Finally, we were in a downpour, with hail and muddy rain that obscured the windshield and made us stop and wipe with a cloth every few miles. Trucks with no tail-lights and great puddles of water that threatened to flood out the motor added to the hazard. The shoulder of the road was, in most places, muddy or dropped off sharply. We finally made it to the hotel in Baghdad at about 8:30, famished and exhausted. A quick meal and a long sleep restored us to normal.

In Baghdad, we found that, as usual, news reports on the BBC and VOA were much exaggerated. We wondered whether the airport might be closed, thus necessitating a trip by road to Amman to fly home. But, everyone got out on the scheduled flights. The museum officials were extraordinarily helpful even though they were in the middle of preparing a major shipment of antiquities for an exhibition in Italy. Our request for permission to take out some dirt, some sherds, and a box of animal bones must have seemed pretty trivial when everyone was working to pack the "Sargon Head," exquisite, unpublished Nimrud ivories, and 400 other great treasures of the Iraq Museum. We are hoping that a similar group of objects can tour the US and Canada in the next few years. Think how the Golden Goat of Ur or the Warka Vase would look in the Mesopotamian Hall. Or would you rather see the gold-faced stone lady or the wistful seated couple from the Inanna Temple at Nippur? Maybe it could happen. We're working on it.



## MAY LECTURE

Donald Whitcomb of the Oriental Institute will present an illustrated lecture, *Persepolis Revisited: Oriental Institute Excavations at Istakhr* on Wednesday, May 29, 1985 at 8 PM in Breasted Hall.

## JUST PUBLISHED

### SAOC 41 (Studies In Ancient Oriental Civilization).

Paul E. Zimansky, *Ecology and Empire: The Structure of the Urartian State*. Chicago, 1985. Pp. xv + 141, including 15 figures, 17 tables, and 15 plates (each plate includes a Landsat satellite photograph and a line-drawn map of the area shown in the photograph). Paperbound with sewn signatures. Price \$16.00

### FROM THE FOREWORD:

"Among the burgeoning nation-states and empires in southwest Asia, the kingdom of Urartu rose suddenly to prominence in the ninth century B.C. Situated in harsh and unpromising terrain just to the north of Assyria, Urartu within a few decades managed through territorial expansion and political alliance to prove itself a dangerous rival of the Assyrian Empire. Paul Zimansky analyzes the resilient superstructure of the Urartian state as a response to its physical and political environment: topography, climate, and the threat of the Assyrian army. Against a detailed geographical background, recreated in part from modern satellite photos, he utilizes a wide range of textual and archaeological materials to present a thesis of cultural adaptation of state structure and organization to ecological exigencies."

Members of the Oriental Institute receive a 20% discount on Oriental Institute publications. Members, faculty, staff, and students however may order one copy of the above book at discount of 50% on the price listed above if the book is purchased by September 30, 1985. Please send your request to the Publications Sales Office at the Oriental Institute and an invoice detailing the price, discount, and postage and handling fees will be sent to you. Book lists of the current publications are also available from the Publications Sales Office upon request.

## FREE SUNDAY FILMS

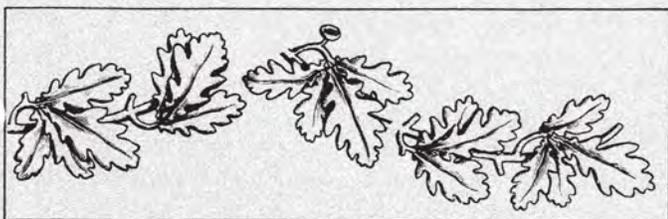
May–September 1985

All films are shown at 2 PM in Breasted Hall, The Oriental Institute

May	12	Preserving Egypt's Past
	19	Megiddo: City of Destruction
	26	Egypt's Pyramids: Houses of Eternity
June	2	The Big Dig
	9	Rivers of Time
	16	The Egyptologists
	23	Iran: Landmarks in the Desert
	30	Turkey: Crossroads of the Ancient World
July	7	Of Time, Tombs and Treasure
	14	Iraq: Stairway to the Gods
	21	Egypt: Gift of the Nile
	28	Myth of the Pharaohs/Ancient Mesopotamia
August	4	Preserving Egypt's Past
	11	Megiddo: City of Destruction
	18	Egypt's Pyramids: Houses of Eternity
	25	The Big Dig
Sept.	1	Rivers of Time
	8	The Egyptologists
	15	Iran: Landmarks in the Desert
	22	Turkey: Crossroads of the Ancient World
	29	Of Time, Tombs and Treasure

## LAST NEWS & NOTES UNTIL FALL

This will be the last regular issue of *News & Notes* until the September-October 1985 one. There will, however, be a summer flier, mailed to you in June, which will list summer programs and lectures at the Institute. We hope you have a wonderful and restful summer and we'll see you in September.



## ORIENTAL INSTITUTE 1985 ARCHAEOLOGICAL TOUR

Cyprus and Crete October 11-27, 1985

Our tour of Cyprus and Crete will be led by Joseph A. Greene, a Ph.D. candidate at the Oriental Institute, who has spent several seasons digging in Cyprus and has led other tours to the Mediterranean. The trip will visit the important archaeological sites in the area, as well as museums, temples and towns. There will also be a special reception at the Cyprus American Archaeological Research Institute (CAARI) and lecture by its director, Stuart Swinney. Enough time is left for individual exploration of the various places visited. A complete itinerary is available from the Membership Office. The cost of the trip from Chicago is:

Land arrangements	\$1795
Round trip air fare from Chicago	\$1279
Single supplement	\$ 300

plus a \$350 tax-deductible contribution to the Oriental Institute. This includes deluxe accommodations or best possible, all land arrangements and most meals. A \$300 deposit is required at the time of booking.

Arrangements may be made beforehand with the travel agent (Archaeological Tours) to travel in Europe or the Near East before or after the tour. Archaeological Tours will be glad to help you with these arrangements but you will be responsible for any additional travel costs or surcharges.

*Information on all tours is available from the Membership Office, The Oriental Institute, 1155 East 58th Street, Chicago, Illinois, 60637. (312) 962-9513.*

Please enroll me/us in the Institute's 1985 Archaeological Tour to Cyprus and Crete: October 11-27, 1985

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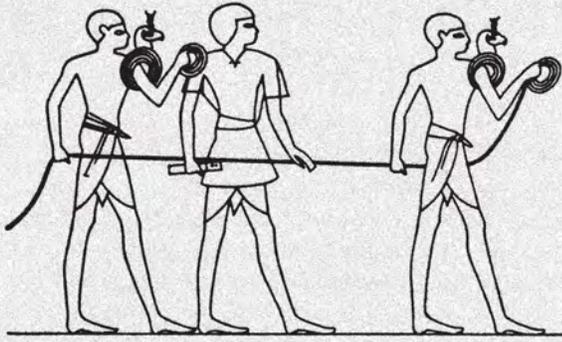
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