

NIPPUR EXPEDITION

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After many years of hiatus from Iraq and after great efforts by Mac Gibson and Chris Woods, we were finally able to resume excavations at Nippur in 2019. The 2019 season was an experimental one with a small staff to test the waters in the post-Saddam Iraq with changed regulations and new administration. We also had the opportunity to complete the repair of the dig house and furnish it for a much larger staff. At the end of the season, we followed the decades-old tradition by re-plastering the walls and sealing the windows of the dig house (fig. 1).

We left Nippur in April 2019 with great hopes. Back in Chicago, we recruited more than twenty specialists in archaeobotany, zooarchaeology, phytolith analysis, and geomagnetic survey from the United States, England, Germany, Poland, Austria, and Iran. Through the insightful and good offices of Dr. Abdulmir Hamdani, the minister of culture and directorate general of the Iraqi Board of Antiquity, we were granted permission to excavate the two major Sumerian centers of Drehem (ancient Puzriš-Dagān) and Dlehim (ancient Tummal), respectively 10 and 20 km south of Nippur (fig. 2). These two sites were the two most important satellites of Nippur, and like Nippur were located on and near the Euphrates. This unprecedented tripartite Sumerian urban cluster embodied a unique ideological and administrative center in the Ur III dynasty.



Figure 1. Nippur dig house and pottery kiln.

Drehem was surveyed by Robert McAdams (1981), who designated the northern mound as no. 1000 (380 x 240 x 4 m) and the southern mound as 1001 (560 x 275 x 8.5 m), 10 and 15 ha in area, respectively. Much of the site is less than 2 m in elevation. The topography of the southern mound indicates that this mound has two distinct northern and southern sectors. A rectangular high mound, circa 60 x 40 x 8 m high mound in the southern mound may well contain a ziggurat (fig. 3). Traces of large buildings, some more than 100 m long, are still clearly visible on both northern and southern mounds. The regular checkered pattern observed on the surface of the mound indicates that much of the architecture was planned and built simultaneously (fig. 4). According to Buccellati's observation of the site in the early 1960s, the illicit diggers recognized the surrounding walls of rooms and simply dug inside the rooms without bothering with the walls (quoted in Tsouparopoulou 2017).

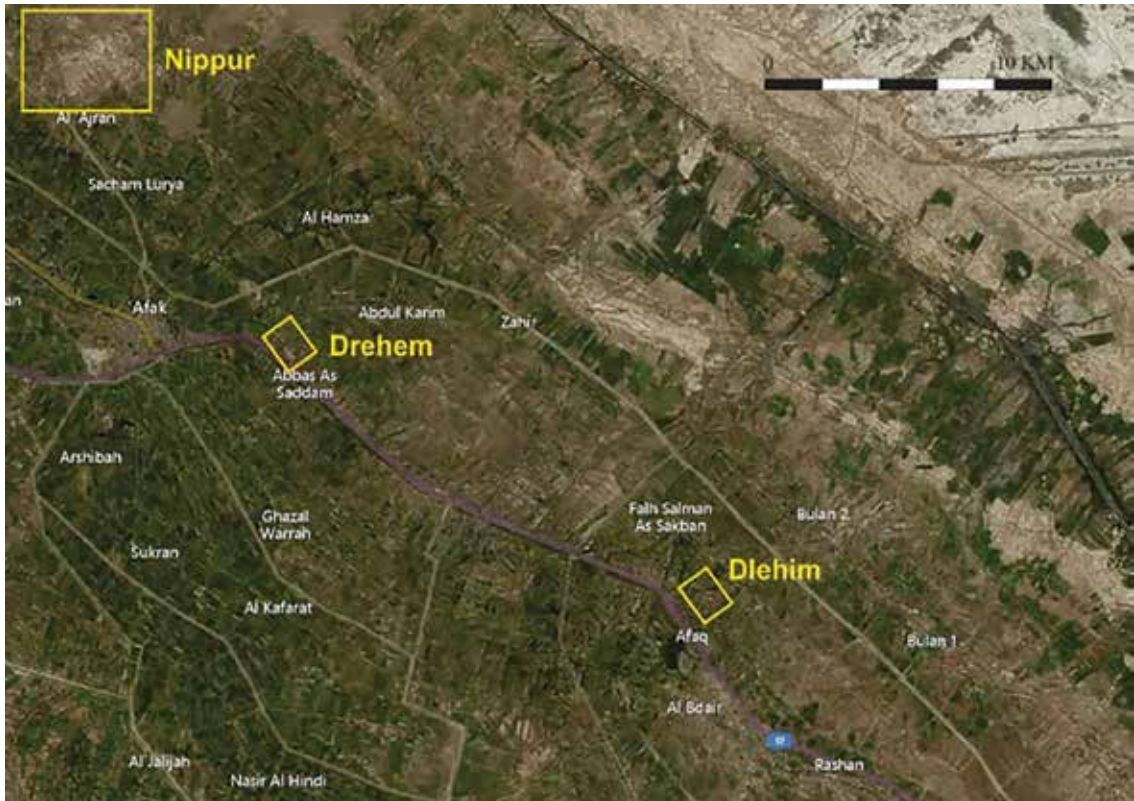


Figure 2. Google satellite image of the Nippur area.

We do not know the early history of Puzriš-Dagān, but according to the year formula for Šulgi's thirty-ninth regnal year (The year Šulgi, king of Ur, . . . , built E-Puzriš-Dagān . . .) (Sallaberger 1990; Sharlach 2004; Sigrist 1992), it was founded in the late third millennium BC. This important management and distribution center for supply and livestock flourished during the reigns of Šulgi, Amar-Suen, and Šu-Sîn. It ceased to function during Ibbi-Sîn, the last Ur III king. However, a forerunner of Puzriš-Dagān was É-Saĝdana, built by Šulgi, and was much closer to Nippur (Wilke 1992). However, based on our 2019 preliminary survey of the southern part of the site, we notice the presence of some doubtful fourth-millennium BC sherds, but the entire occupation dates to Ur III time and possibly the Isin-Larsa period.

Except for two small trenches in the southern mound that were excavated by Iraqi archaeologists in 2007 (unpublished), no other formal excavations have been conducted at the site (fig. 3). But illegal excavations in the early 1900s that made the northern parts of the mound look like a beehive produced thousands of cuneiform tablets (fig. 4). The tablets appeared on the market around 1909–10. The estimated 10,000–12,000 tablets that reportedly came from Puzriš-Dagān indicate that the site was an important administrative center for the *bala* tax system during the Ur III dynasty—of 2,700 tablets of the Ur III dynasty at the Oriental Institute tablet collection, 1,104 are attributed to Puzriš-Dagān and were published by Hilbert in 1998 and 2003. *Bala*, a Sumerian word meaning “ration or transfer,” is a rational system of payments made by the provinces to the crown. Excavations at this site will not only produce further textual evidence but also provide a woefully needed context for the available tablets.



Figure 3. Bing Maps image of Puzriš-Dagān.

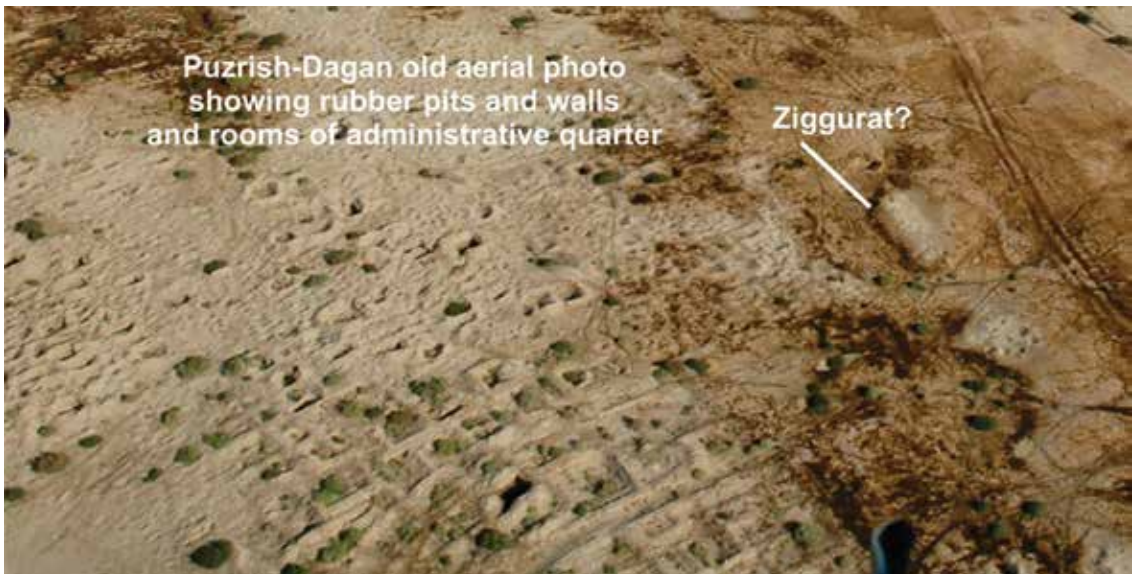


Figure 4. Old aerial photograph of Puzriš-Dagān (modern Drehem) with traces of large buildings and robber trenches still visible.

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Dlehim is identified as ancient Tummal (Sallaberger 1993; Steinkeller 2001; Yoshikawa 1989). The site was first surveyed and reported by Robert McAdams (1981, no. 1237). Tummal is located some 10 km south of Puzriš-Dagān and may have been connected to it and to Nippur through a major canal. The sprawling circa 40 ha low mound (between 1.5 to 2.5 m in elevation) surrounds a prominent high mound in the southwest (fig. 5). An ancient canal, clearly visible in the aerial image, divides the site into east and west sections. The eastern section is also divided by what appears to be a major street. Traces of buildings with alleys are clearly visible here and in the south of the high mound. Parts of the city wall are also visible in the south and western sectors of the mound (fig. 5).

Tummal, the site of the funerary chapel/libation place (ki-a-nag) of Ur-Namma and the temple of Ninlil (Sallaberger 1993; Sigris 1992; Steinkeller 2001), is situated 5 km east of the ancient bed of the Euphrates and was linked to that river by a major canal (Stienkeller 2001). Based on the surface sherds, the site was first occupied during the Early Uruk period. Adams reports of the widespread presence of Jemdet Nasr sherds on the site, but we did not find any. The site was reoccupied in Akkadian times, but its major occupation was during the Ur III dynasty. While we did not find any later sherds, Adams reported some Parthian sherds from the base of the high mound (Adams 1981: 278).

We have long-term plans to excavate these three sites, especially Tummal and Puzriš-Dagān, which are archaeologically almost completely unknown. Thanks to Dr. Hamdani, we received our visa authorization numbers in November and were preparing to go in January. Alas, COVID-19 interfered, and we had to postpone our plans until an effective vaccine is available or the pandemic is over.

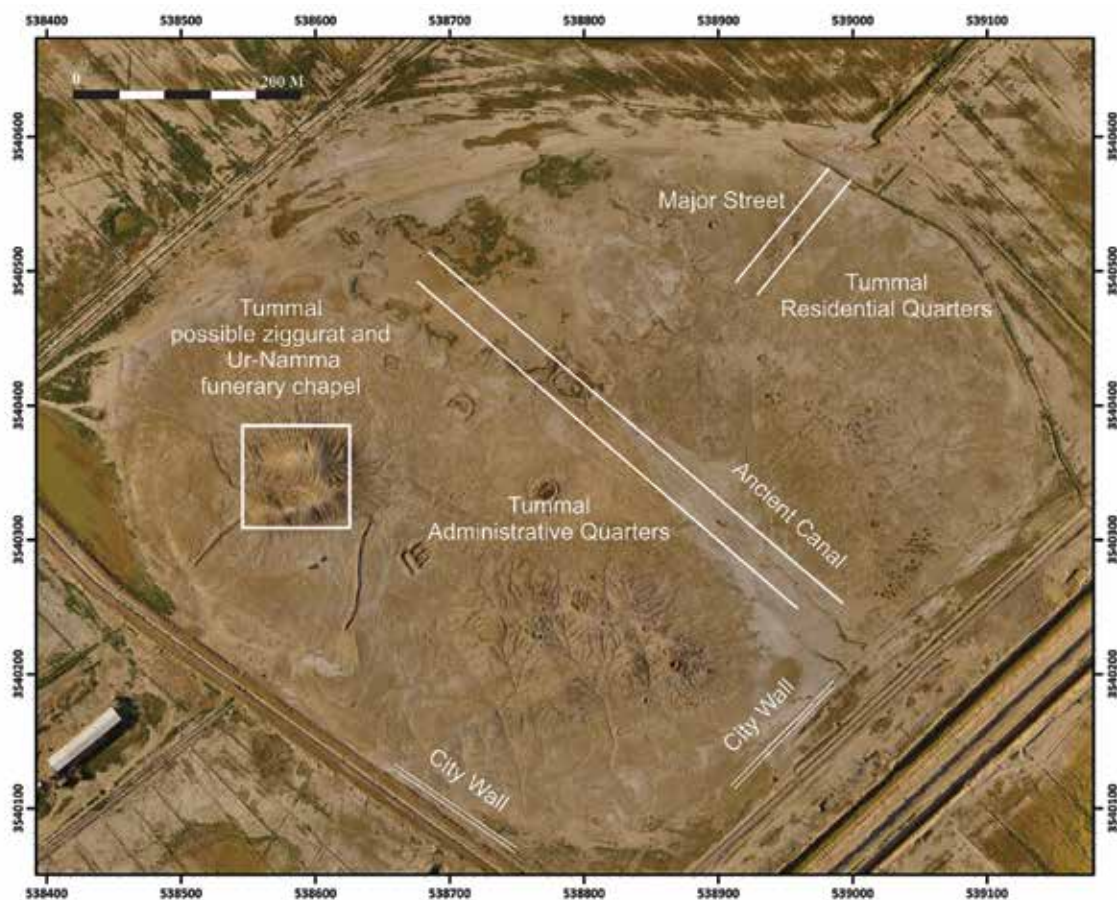


Figure 5. 2019 drone image of Dlehim (ancient Tummal). Photo by Andrew Wright.

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