

# NIPPUR

AUGUSTA McMAHON

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The new five-year research plan for the excavations at Nippur was approved by the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage in summer 2023, and we are very grateful for this approval and excited for our renewed collaboration. Our next phase of research at Nippur will focus on the rapid expansion of this important city during two key historical periods: the late third millennium BCE (Ur III period) and the mid-second millennium BCE (Kassite period). In each of these historical periods, a state-organized expansion and/or reoccupation of the city took place, involving the building of new city walls and the extension or rebuilding of major temples, especially those dedicated to the gods Enlil and Inanna. These massive construction projects expanded into and affected the arrangement of neighborhoods adjacent to the temple complexes on the east mound, probably resulting in the displacement of these neighborhoods' residents to elsewhere within the city. The construction projects, with their associated administration and increased demand for materials and manufactured products, also created employment opportunities and probably led to immigration into the city by residents of the countryside and other settlements in the region.

This displacement and immigration had a particular impact on the occupation of Nippur's southern edge, and it is this area of the city that is our current research focus. Nippur was first established in the sixth or fifth millennium BCE Ubaid period, and the settlement expanded across the fourth to mid-third millennium BCE to form an approximately 80-hectare site symmetrically bisected by a channel of the Euphrates, the Shatt al-Nil. We know from Mac Gibson's excavations in the 1970s and 1980s that the southern area of the city was not occupied until the late third millennium BCE Ur III period, when houses and at least one large administrative building were established there on virgin soil. This new occupation contributed to the expansion of the settlement to approximately 135 hectares, and the area was encircled by a new city wall toward the end of the Ur III period. We assume that this part of the site was occupied both by displaced existing residents and by new immigrants. After the collapse of the Ur III state in about 2004 BCE, Nippur contracted in size as many of its inhabitants presumably left for other opportunities. The southern area was abandoned and then reoccupied only in the second half of the second millennium BCE, during the Kassite period, at which point the city regained the same 135-hectare extent. We assume the occupants of the southern area during this later period were largely new arrivals from elsewhere within Babylonia and beyond.

Our research questions assess and compare the occupational density of Nippur's southern area, and the demographic diversity and mobility of its inhabitants, during the late third and mid-second millennia BCE. In each period, was the southern area occupied by relatively poor workers, by wealthy "suburbanites," or by a mixed and diverse population? What kinds of households moved into this area in each distinct historical context: extended families committed to life in a new city, or small groups of unrelated young people opportunistically job hunting? Our methods involve the assessment of multiple variables, from traditional house sizes, plans, and contents to scientific analyses of individuals' and households' diet and foodways.

We went to Nippur in January 2024 with a strong international team of colleagues and students from the Universities of Chicago, Cambridge, Pennsylvania, Rome La Sapienza, Rutgers, and Winnipeg, and we were joined by five colleagues from the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage. We began with several extended walks over the site so that the students in particular could become familiar with the site's topography and the locations of previous excavations. Figure 1 shows the first wave of the team standing in the 1951–52 Area TA excavation, in the approximate location of House F—the building where school



Figure 1. The Nippur team standing in Area TA, in the eroded infill above House F.



Figure 2. Surface clearing in one of our new trenches in Area WC, at the southern edge of Nippur.

texts were recovered that allowed the reconstruction of the process of Mesopotamian scribal education and that were featured in the 2023–24 ISAC Museum special exhibition *Back to School in Babylonia*. We then established a new benchmark for mapping and began excavating two trenches along the city wall in the southern area of the site, in areas with Ur III and Kassite pottery at the surface. However, global political events created a specific security threat for the team that led to our (safe) evacuation from the site after less than a week of work. During that week, we had begun to expose the inner edge of the Kassite city wall and the areas immediately within this wall with the aim of examining the houses nearest to the city’s boundary (fig. 2). Both trenches held huge promise and were the first of several that we had planned for this year. We are keeping in close contact with Iraqi colleagues, and the security situation appears to have improved; we plan to return in January 2025.