

NIPPUR

McGuire Gibson

As far as we can tell from reports made by our two guards at Nippur and from occasional e-mails by various U.S. military and State Department personnel who have visited, the site remains intact. There is, in fact, a fence around it, although I can still not get an accurate idea of where it goes and whether or not it encloses everything. The fence was put up sometime in 2004 or 2005. In addition to our guards, there are also a number of State Antiquities Guards who live in a building constructed near our expedition house. Photos sent by e-mail show the site looking sad and subject to natural degradation, but there is no looting. The lack of activity is exactly what we would wish for all sites in Iraq under the current insecure conditions.

Recently, a group of scholars visited eight sites in the area about 100 km south of Nippur and found evidence that those mounds had not been looted at all or that looting had stopped a couple of years ago. Given the sites they chose to visit, that is not very surprising. We have known since 2003 that Ur is safe, inside a U.S. Air Force base perimeter. Ubaid and Eridu are also unharmed, but these are not far from Ur, and the presence of so many troops has probably discouraged looting in the vicinity. There was some damage at the site of Tell al-Lahm, to the east of Ur, but this seems to be minor. We have also known for years that Uruk is safe because the guards hired by the German expedition are backed up by their entire tribe. I also knew that ancient Lagash (Tell al-Hiba) was safe because I saw it in 2003 and it was intact at that time and as late as last year, satellite images showed that it was still not looted. It was surprising that Larsa is said to be undamaged, because satellite images from three or four years ago seemed to show that part of it was being leveled with machines. In the group's report, however, it is clear that they did not visit that part of the site but stayed mainly on the higher ground. All this is good news, but if the team had gone to neighboring sites, and especially if they had gone into the area near Nippur, they would have found many mounds still being destroyed by illegal digging. Anyone who has Google Earth on their computers can look at sites in southern Iraq and see the pock-marked surfaces of mounds.

Once the news broke that archaeologists had found the situation at some sites to be better than anticipated, some right-wing media in the United States used the information as proof that archaeologists and other media outlets had made up the story of site looting to begin with. A Web site in England has re-posted a 2003 *Guardian* article based on a television documentary by Dan Cruikshank, which was full of errors, distortions, and even libelous statements that the Iraq National Museum was not looted all that much in April 2003 but that previously the officials in the organization had been helping the Saddam regime to take objects from the collection and sell them abroad.

News media in general have been publishing stories, during the past year, about Iraq National Museum objects being returned from Jordan, Syria, and elsewhere leading the reader to think that everything is being recovered. No one says that these objects have been held in these countries for several years, and that they are included in the count of artifacts that have been "recovered or returned" to Iraq. The number of objects stolen from the Iraq Museum in April 2003 was higher than 15,000. The number of "recovered and returned" objects still amounts to only about 6,000 objects, about the same as what it was a couple of years ago. But the fact that the Iraqis think it is time now to ask for the objects may mean that things really are improving in the country. Maybe there will be a return to some kind of normality that allows the resumption of research in Iraq in the next few years.

In regard to research and publication, I have some very good news to report. Just as I was sitting to write this piece I was notified that the National Endowment for the Humanities has made a major award that will allow us to prepare the backlog of Nippur volumes for publication. This grant gives us the financial means to analyze and write the monographs that we have been working at piecemeal for years. The project, over the next three years, will engage scholars at Pennsylvania, the Royal Ontario Museum, Harvard, and Chicago in a coordinated effort to bring into print the monographs on the Inanna Temple and the Parthian Fortress, which were excavated before I became director. It will also allow the preparation of the manuscripts on all of the seasons in which I have directed the work (1972–1990). In addition, we will be able to publish a report on the first two seasons at Abu Salabikh, which the late Donald P. Hansen excavated in 1962 and 1964/65. Taking part with me in this effort will be Richard L. Zettler at Penn, Karen Wilson, Jean Evans, Robert D. Biggs (Inanna Temple) and Judith A. Franke (Parthian Fortress) at Chicago, Edward Keall of the Royal Ontario Museum, and James A. Armstrong of Harvard (WC-3, TC). Judith A. Franke will also publish her study on Area WB, where she excavated an Old Babylonian baker's house and a Kassite administrative building. My own role will be as the coordinator of all the efforts and as chief author of the reports on large operations at WA, where we exposed part of the Gula Temple, and investigations at points along the city wall. John C. Sanders will consult on the architecture. Work on the project is beginning in summer 2008. We are very grateful to the NEH and to the readers of the proposal who ranked it for funding.
