

Surface Reconnaissance of Southern Iraq

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Ancient Mesopotamia was a land always dependent on irrigation, its towns and cities hugging the banks of the major watercourses. The Tigris and Euphrates rivers followed naturally meandering courses across its plains, dividing and rejoining in a number of shifting branches that periodically raised the surface of the land when they spilled over their banks. The towns themselves, built largely of mud brick, moved, were destroyed or abandoned, and then from time to time were resettled.

The problem of working out and interpreting this complex sequence of changes is one for which surface reconnaissance rather than excavation is the primary procedure on which the historical geographer or archeologist must rely. Working from aerial photographs of the virtually unmapped area has involved an exhaustive mapping of physical irregularities that suggest old canal levees, river channels, and sites of former habitation. Then the latter have needed to be carefully scrutinized from the ground, often at the pains of long hours of travel on foot or in a four-wheel-drive vehicle. Collections of surface sherds permitted dates of occupation to be assigned to the ancient sites and hence also to the watercourses along whose banks they were situated. An innovation in technique this year was the use of what is best described as a kind of kite for supplementary low-level aerial photographs. This device, known as a Jalbert Parafoil, was originally designed to carry meteorological instruments but was adapted in the Institute's laboratory to the new payload of a radio-controlled camera.

In the season just completed, surveys were focused on the region around the ancient city of Uruk. This was one of the earliest and greatest of the Sumerian urban centers, and an expedition from the German Archaeological Institute has excavated there for many years. The reconnaissance was sponsored jointly by the Oriental Institute and the German Archaeological Institute, with Dr. Hans J. Nissen representing the latter in the conduct of field work. Our initiation of the project was partly made possible by assistance



Completion of excavations in apartments along a street within the south quarter of the Parthian fortress in Nippur—taken from the Jalbert Parafoil.

from the Baghdad School of the American Schools of Oriental Research, of which I was Annual Professor during 1966/67.

Major findings of the reconnaissance fall into several categories. More than 450 perviously unknown sites were recorded, in a remote and difficult area that today includes extensive belts of sand dunes, much empty steppe peopled only by nomads, and areas of seasonal swamp along the rivers. The first climax of settlement seems to have occurred in the fourth millennium B.C., with literally hundreds of villages and small towns in areas now largely abandoned. By 3000 B.C. or soon after, a process of consolidation was well under way, with rapid growth of a few major, fortified centers like Uruk, while the size and number of outlying settlements rapidly dwindled.

Later climaxes of settlement, characterized by different settlement and irrigation patterns, also have been recorded. Perhaps the densest population of the region was attained during the Parthian period, roughly at the time of Christ. Some centuries later the abandonment began in the southern part of the area, in response to social or environmental pressures whose nature is still open to doubt. Arab conquerors, coming in the seventh century A.D., seem to have hastened the process of destruction in this area as they focused their attention on building new cities elsewhere.