

NIPPUR AND UMM AL-HAFRIYAT

McGuire Gibson

At the risk of repeating myself, I can report once again that real progress was made in publishing results of excavations carried out before the Gulf War in Iraq. Most tangible was a substantial article that appeared in the British journal *Iraq* during the past year. Entitled "The City Walls of Nippur and an Islamic Site Beyond," the piece was written with James Armstrong and Augusta McMahon, with architectural interpretation by John Sanders. This article reports on the results of the seventeenth season (1987) at Nippur when we were able to work out the history of city wall building at the city and, in addition, investigated an Islamic site about a few hundred meters northeast of the ziggurat. The Islamic site was a small town that had been occupied in the fourteenth century AD, just after the Mongols had conquered Iraq. The town had been completely covered over by sand dunes from sometime after 1920 until the mid 1980s, when it was exposed by the moving away of the dune belt that has made Nippur both beautiful and difficult as a site to excavate. Maggie Brandt, a student working on an environmental project, noticed the beautiful cobalt blue glazed pottery on the site when she was investigating the traces of ancient irrigation northeast of Nippur. I had been over that area dozens of times in the past, but had never seen anything because I had been traveling over sand. The low profile of the site, and the uniform assemblage of artifacts on the surface, suggested that the town was occupied only a short time, maybe less than a century. Thus, we thought that in one season we could expose a good deal of the town plan. There have been almost no excavations of sites of the fourteenth century, meaning that this operation would have importance beyond the site itself.

Because mudbrick walls hold moisture longer than the looser soil around them, we could see many of the walls of the houses and could pick up sherds room by room. After collecting from the surface artifacts that included sherds, coins, glass, iron tools, and even the hardware from doors, James Armstrong began to dig a pit in one room of a house. Within a short time, it was evident that the site would yield no more information than that which was visible on the surface. Wind and water erosion had erased all but a centimeter or two of the walls and had left only traces of the dirt floors in the rooms. With a sweep of the trowel, we were in the sterile soil under the buildings. Despite our disappointment in excavation, we were able to derive a good deal of information on the site from the surface scatter alone.

Excavations on the northeastern stretch of the city walls, carried out by Augusta McMahon, were more fruitful. We were able to supplement the information derived from the old excavations done on the walls by Pennsylvania in the 1890s and were able to add much new detail. But the size of the problem was too great for us to resolve unless we removed many tons of Parthian construction (ca. AD 100) from above the ancient walls, which dated to the Early Dynastic, Akkadian, and Ur III periods (2900–2100 BC). Thinking that we would have many future seasons to resume this work on a grand scale, we shifted to the southern corner of the city, Area WC, where we had found remains of city walls of the Ur III (2200–2100 BC) and Kassite (ca. 1300 BC) periods, but nothing earlier. This seeming lack of match



Area WC. Nippur

between city walls on one end of the city and the other needed resolving. For example, it was still not certain that the Ur III wall was the earliest one at that part of the site. We cut a 3 m wide trench through the walls that resulted in a clear picture of the succession of fortifications. Here, we found evidence of city walls with moats cut not only in the Kassite period, but in the early Neo-Babylonian period (seventh–sixth centuries BC) as well. And we could prove definitely that there was no occupation, and no city walls, in the WC area until the Ur III period. We concluded that the city of Nippur had been much smaller until Ur III times, when it had expanded greatly. Subsequently, it shrank in size and presumably population, growing to its full size in only two other periods (Kassite and early Neo-Babylonian) when Area WC was once more occupied and fortified.

We had actually prepared a report on all this work and had submitted it to the Iraqi journal *Sumer* in 1988. The Gulf War caused disruptions in the operations of the Department of Antiquities, including the publishing of the journal. In order to make sure that the information would be published, we revised the article a couple of years ago and submitted it to *Iraq*.

More comprehensive, final monograph publications are in progress. Augusta McMahon, who now teaches at Cambridge University has revised her dissertation on the critical transition between the Early Dynastic and Akkadian Periods (ca. 2350 BC). The manuscript has been read and returned to her for minor revisions. It will be submitted formally to the Oriental Institute Publications Office in September 1999 and should appear as an Oriental Institute Publication within a year of that date.

Judith Franke, now the director of the Dickson Mounds Museum in downstate Illinois, did, as she promised last year, take time off to work on the report she has been preparing on Area WB, where an Old Babylonian bakers' house (ca. 1800 BC) was found under a thirteenth century Kassite administrative palace.

James Armstrong, Curator of the Harvard Semitic Museum, has spent a good part of the last few months working on his important book on the archaeological and historical evidence for Nippur from the Kassite period through the early Neo-Babylonian (thirteenth–sixth century BC).

Here in Chicago, I have found a bit of time to work on the manuscript of Area WG, in which we exposed a very important sequence of material from Parthian into Abbasid times (ca. AD 100–900). This report is almost complete since I have in hand a number of chapters by other collaborators.

Also during the year, a graduate student, Jason Ur, entered the basic data from Umm al-Hafriyat into a computer database. With a couple of months of free time, I should be able to write up much of the report on this site, which is a specialized pottery-producing town out in the desert east of Nippur.

Unfortunately, as time passes, we seem no nearer to resuming work at Nippur. The Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities would like us to return, but the embargo keeps us out. In the meantime, there has been a great deal of destruction of sites caused by illegal diggers, and the Directorate is so understaffed and underfunded that it can do almost nothing to stop it. So far, Nippur has not been damaged in this way. The guard on the site is apparently effective. We do hear of illegal digging at Tell Bismaya, ancient Adab, a site that is about 35 km southeast of Nippur. We have learned that tablets and other inscribed items from Bismaya are appearing on the international antiquities market. Bismaya was the first site that the University of Chicago dug in the Near East, in 1904/05. Some of the most important artifacts that were on display in the old Mesopotamian gallery are from those excavations.

The Directorate of Antiquities is going to start small excavations at some major sites that have been badly damaged, in the hope that this activity will deter the illegal diggers and slow down the smuggling. A member of the Directorate recently sent me photographs of one site, ancient Umma, which is a very important Sumerian center. In the photographs, there are dozens of square-cut, huge gouges in the tell, left by bulldozers or front-end loaders. The damage to that site is irreparable, and the inscribed antiquities from the site that have passed through London in the past few years has been described as “a flood.” This trade is, of course, illegal, but little has been done to stop it in Europe or the United States. In Baghdad, one official of the Directorate who was actively trying to halt the trade in Iraq was recently stabbed “by an unknown assailant.” He survived the attack.

The key to our work in the Near East has always been the welcome and collaboration we receive from well-trained professional archaeologists and philologists from the host countries. In the past nine years, both the Directorate of Antiquities and the Iraqi universities have lost dozens of archaeologists and philologists with doctorates from Europe and the United States. These men and women now teach in Jordan, the Gulf, Yemen, and Libya or work in completely different fields in Iraq or in the United States, Canada, and Europe. Even if normal archaeological work were to resume in Iraq tomorrow, it would take a generation or more to reconstruct the Iraqi Directorate of Antiquities and the Departments of Archaeology at the University of Baghdad and elsewhere. This loss of expertise, rather than the damage to sites or museums, is the most harmful, lasting effect on the world’s heritage of the war and the embargo.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Given the current conditions, our publications and those of our colleagues elsewhere take on greater importance. It is these publications that preserve the archaeological record and lay the groundwork for training a new generation of scholars, not only in Iraq but in the rest of the world.

For this reason, the continued support of the Nippur project by Oriental Institute members is even more important, and is gratefully acknowledged.
