

NIPPUR

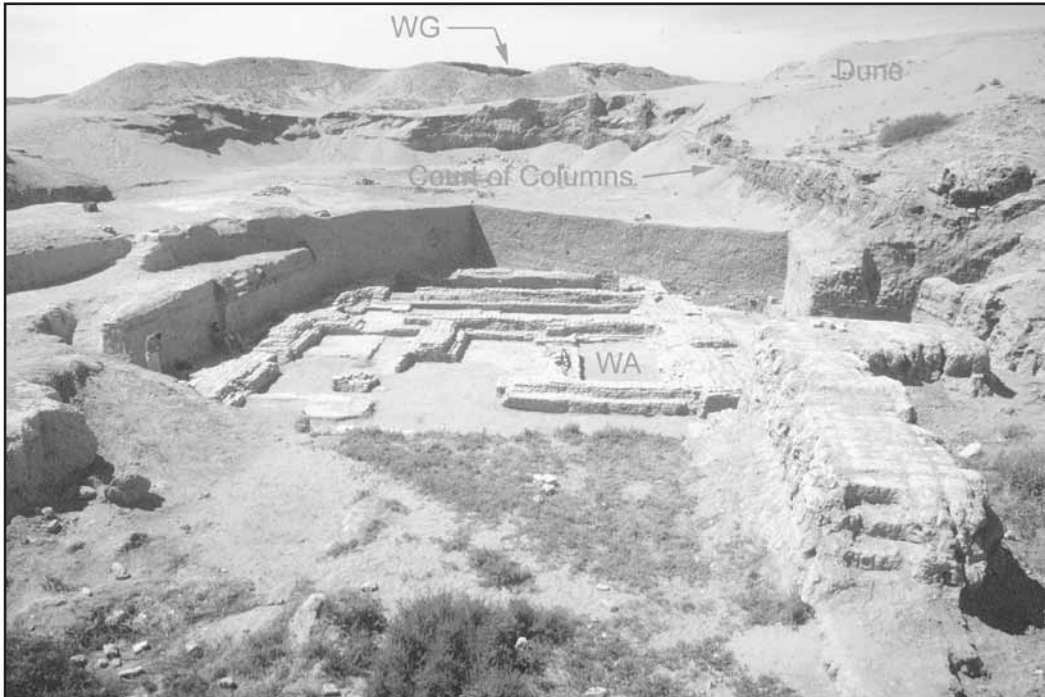
McGuire Gibson

Finally, after a long time, I have real, substantial progress to report on the publications of Nippur. I have been working, between classes, committee meetings, and Hamoukar, on one of the reports of our seasons at Nippur. There are several manuscripts at different stages of preparation on several aspects of the digging, but one of them is closer to completion than the others.

Back in 1989, after more than a decade working on other areas of the mound, and even on other sites like Umm al-Hafriyat and Uch Tepe, the expedition returned to Area WA, the place where we had begun to work when I was first the director at Nippur in the early 1970s. Although we had found what was clearly a very large and important temple there, we had to give up work in WA by 1975. The reason for quitting was that the area was being overrun by a huge set of dunes, and with rising labor costs we were unable to move enough of the sand, even using dozens of men and our railroad, to expose more than a room or two each year. Every time we returned to the site, we found that the dunes had covered over our work.

The sand was on the site because Nippur was at the western edge of a huge dune belt that ran midway between the Tigris and Euphrates. When I first worked in Iraq, in 1964, the dune belt stretched from about twenty kilometers south of Baghdad down to the area of the great marshes near Basra, with Nippur about halfway down. With the creation of new irrigation projects at its northern, eastern, and southwestern edges, however, the dune belt began to diminish. During the late 1970s and 1980s, we could see dramatic changes in the dunes. One of the enjoyable things to do on a Friday, when we took our day off, was to get in the Land Rover and head out into the dunes to visit ancient sites. There were areas of open desert within the dune belt and beyond it, and once we wound our way through the first few kilometers of dunes, we could drive for miles toward the Tigris past hundreds of sites. We had a route through the dunes, but we often found that where there had been an easy passage a week earlier, now we were blocked and had to backtrack and find another way through. We were often stuck when

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Areas WA, WG, and Court of Columns. Nippur, Iraq

we misjudged the ability of the car to ride over a low dune, but the key to getting out was to have a shovel to remove the sand from around the wheels and enough passengers to give a good push. By 1980, our drive through the dunes was much easier because the entire belt was moving progressively north and east, and the western fringe that had overlain all of Nippur was now more than a kilometer north and east of the site. A few remnant dunes still remained in low spots on the site, but we were virtually free of sand.

We might have gone back to work on the temple in WA earlier in the 1980s, but the Iran-Iraq War was going on and the situation was a little chancy to plan anything long-term or grand. Adding to the difficulty was the fact that many of our workmen had been called into the army. There were also sporadic shortages of basic supplies, as the war effort distorted the normal economy. We decided to continue with small-scale, tightly focused excavations near the house, which involved much easier logistics. Because the digging was done so near the house and was relatively small-scale, we could also close down easier and faster, if the need arose. Luckily, although sometimes we could hear the big guns at the front and once had a nervous day when the Iranians crossed the Tigris, we never had to leave, and our excavations furnished us with important new information on the history of the city wall and on the city in the Kassite period (thirteenth century BC) and in the time of Assyrian domination (seventh century BC). In 1988 the war ended and we could foresee a long period of productive work at the site. Thus, in the following year, we returned to the WA area with the idea of forming a large-scale plan.

As could be predicted, one of the few places where dunes still lay on the mound was down in Area WA. Although very large, the dune had been reduced enough to allow us to see, for the first time since 1965, the pillars of baked bricks that had been around a courtyard that had inspired the name “Court of Columns.” This Parthian building (ca. AD 100) was found by the Pennsylvania expedition in 1889. I had seen the columns in 1964/65, but by 1972,

they were completely covered. When we began digging in WA seven years later, I was surprised not to see the columns, and I became convinced that someone, maybe one of the guards, had taken the bricks to use in the repair of a house. But, now, here was the Court of Columns once again. Although the dune had moved off the Court of Columns, it still lay over most of WA, deeper down. Being a deep hole, the sand tended to lodge there, and the winds that had taken the rest of the dunes from the site would only occasionally dip down into WA and remove sand. But enough of the sand had been removed from the entire area to show that Pennsylvania's previous work and a gully or two furnished us with a space of about a hundred meters by a hundred meters in which to work. If we could dig this entire area systematically, level by level, we would be able to show not only how the temple changed through time but also its relationship with its immediate surroundings. We had been able to expose a few rooms of the temple in a number of periods in previous seasons and knew already that there were remains of six re-buildings stacked on one another. These versions of the temple, from the top one down, were datable to the sixth century (Neo-Babylonian/Achaemenid), seventh century (Assyrian domination), Kassite (ca. 1250 BC), Old Babylonian (ca. 1700 BC), Isin-Larsa (ca. 1900 BC) and Ur III (ca. 2000 BC). We had every expectation that down below the Ur III level, there would be ten or more earlier versions of the building dating to as early as the Uruk Period (ca. 3500 BC). In other words, the temple in WA and its surrounding buildings should produce a sequence as long and as impressive as the one recovered in the Inanna Temple, which had been excavated in the 1960s just a hundred meters or so east, across the main canal that divides the city. We still did not know whose temple we had discovered, but we assumed that it was a major one from the size of the rooms and walls. In the nineteenth season, 1990, we were to find evidence to prove that the WA temple was dedicated to Gula, the goddess of medicine. It may be that the building was shared by her consort, the great god Ninurta, one of the chief gods of Nippur.

Within the projected hundred by hundred me-



Islamic pitcher. Nippur, Iraq



Reeds in the sand. Nippur, Iraq

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*Area WG, Nippur, Iraq*

ter space were several dumps left by the Pennsylvania expedition of the 1890s, as well as some gigantic mudbrick foundations (five meters thick by five meters high by thirty-five meters long) of Parthian buildings (ca. AD 100) that the Pennsylvania team had found and left in place, although they had made huge trenches through them. To remove the dumps or any one of the foundation remnants would have taken us several years, if we had to work as we had been doing in the early 1970s. But by 1989 we no longer had to rely on just shovels and our hand-pushed railroad. There were many front-end-loaders and dump trucks available in the country, and they could be hired for a reasonable amount of money. I figured that in one month or so, with machines, I could clear the area down to about the Neo-Babylonian level (ca. 550 BC). But before doing that, I wanted to carry out one important operation by more traditional means, so we would put off the machines until the next season.

In the winter of 1989, we excavated a new area we called WG, at the western edge of WA, on the highest point of the West Mound. It was here that Pennsylvania had pitched its first camp of tents and reed houses a hundred years earlier. That expedition almost froze to death up there, whipped by the winter wind and rain. In the next season, Pennsylvania sensibly moved to the foot of the mound, where its camp would be sheltered and close to water. Our first level in WG is actually the Pennsylvania occupation, with fragments of medicine bottles, rifle shells, and the burned stumps of reeds that made up the walls of the huts. The burned reeds gave graphic evidence of the fire that consumed that first camp when the expedition got caught in the middle of a tribal feud. I have been told that the fire that burned more than a third of our own expedition house in 1995 was a maneuver in a tribal feud arising from the same old quarrel.

Our investigation at WG was designed both to determine the full stratigraphy that lay above the WA temple and to make clear the transition from the pre-Islamic to the Islamic period. The shift to Islamic control was one of the most important cultural transitions in the history of

the world. But, in terms of material culture, we know very little about the change. At Nippur, for years, we have been making an effort to show that, between any two historical periods, there was always a cultural lag, with objects of the earlier period lasting for some time into the later one. Just because you had a new king, or a new dynasty, you didn't change the shape or design of pots or metalwork. We can show that even with objects that are intimately connected with administration, such as seals or coins, it took some years to shift completely to a new style. When Islam conquered Iraq, the new rulers did not change the denominations or general design of the coins, although they did start to replace the Pahlavi inscriptions of the Sasanian (Persian) rulers with Arabic ones. It took about seventy-five years before completely new coin designs were introduced. Of course, new rulers would want to keep the economy ticking over, and would be very careful to make the transition to new money only with a lot of care. They would not have cared as much about everyday objects, so pottery, our main kind of artifact, would have changed at its own pace, not as a result of any centralized decision. Our work in Area WG was designed to find enough artifacts in good architectural context along with dated coins to allow us to say when we had crossed the historical line from Sasanian to Islamic, and we expected to be able to show that material culture was essentially the same on either side of it.

Our results in 1989 were very gratifying. We did, in fact, find Early Islamic buildings lying directly on Sasanian houses (AD 226–637), and under those we exposed houses of late Parthian times (ca. AD 100–226). In several of the levels, we found coins that could be dated, and thus we have a firm basis for dating the sequence of pottery and other artifacts. We had the cooperation that season of Ed Keall of the Royal Ontario Museum and his associate Krzystov Ciuk, who were to study the pottery. We also had the participation of Erica Hunter, an Australian living in England, who is totally devoted to Aramaic bowls. Nippur is espe-



Parthian "slipper" coffin. Nippur, Iraq

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Aramaic incantation bowl. Nippur, Iraq

cially noted for having produced dozens of these bowls, which have in their interiors writing, and sometimes drawings, that are meant to protect a household from evil spirits. Chief among the demons was Lilith, who snatched away children. The drawing, usually in the center of the bowl and often ludicrous, shows a creature in chains. The words are normally written in a spiral, from the outer edge down toward the center, so that it is the prayer, naming the members of the household and even the animals and possessions of the family, that keeps the demon in check. Some of our bowls have a “writing” that is merely scratches with a pen. In these cases, the priest who “wrote”

the spell for the family was illiterate, but then so were the family members.

Through the years, we have found numerous Aramaic bowls of this kind on the slopes of Nippur, usually in gullies where recent rains have washed away the ancient debris from around the bowls, leaving them partially or completely exposed. The bowls are always found upside down, as if they could prevent the demons from coming up.

In our excavation at Area WG, we found several Aramaic bowls in place, upside down, buried under the floors of houses. We have them both in rooms and in the courtyards. And although such bowls are routinely referred to as Sasanian bowls, we found more of them in early Islamic context than in Sasanian — again, an example of cultural lag.

This operation in WG is the publication I am working on. It isn’t the one that many scholars in the field would like to see, since they want to know about our work in earlier historical periods, but it is the report that is closest to being finished. For some years, I have had a manuscript and illustrations on the pottery from Keall and Ciuk, and a finished chapter on the Aramaic bowls by Erica Hunter. Carol Meyer finished her piece on the ancient glass some time ago. David Reese is finishing his report on the animal bones — and you can see how the evidence of the bones would be important in the Sasanian-Islamic transition. Did pigs disappear from the diet with the coming of Islam? If they didn’t, does this mean that in the WG area we are dealing with Christians? There were enough Christians at Nippur that it was

the seat of a bishop. Surely, the city’s ancient role as the primary center of Mesopotamian religion must have influenced the placement of a major bishopric here.

To finish the monograph, all that needs to be done is my own report on the digging itself, with the architecture and stratigraphy. I was happy to discover that I have already written a substantial introduction and part of the first chapter, and that the object catalog is done. Now, with the help of



Islamic coin (left) and Sasanian coin (right). Nippur, Iraq. Scale ca. 2:1

Alexandra Witsell, a graduate student, and Jim Armstrong, who dug WG and is a co-author, we will get those parts finished by the end of summer 2002.

Nippur itself, as far as I know, stands neglected but not damaged. We have a guard on the site, and he and the local sheikh guarantee that the mound is not being dug illicitly, as are so many other sites in Iraq. But there is a potential problem. I hear from an Iraqi friend, who checks on the situation, that there is no water in the canal at Nippur, and that the farmers cannot continue to live there much longer. The guard is drilling an artesian well and hoping to get enough water to stay in place, but if all his neighbors leave, he will find it extremely difficult to remain. The problem with the flow is that the Turks are taking so much water for new dams on both the Tigris and Euphrates that little water reaches southern Iraq. A similar situation existed in the mid-1970s, when the Syrians were filling their new dam at Tabqa. At that time, the Nippur area received water about two days a week, just enough to water some vegetables and animals and people, but not enough to sustain major crops. While the Nippur area itself was able to survive the year or two of water shortage, about 20,000 people along the canal just south of Nippur had to be relocated to the rainfall zone north of Baghdad. They did not return to restore their farms for more than five years. Being an irrigation zone, southern Iraq cannot continue as an agricultural area or even support towns and villages if the water supply continues at this level. Already, the great marshes that have been a feature of southern Iraq for millennia have disappeared. This loss of a great ecosystem happened mainly because of the development of new dams and increased irrigation in all three countries, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, over the past thirty years. The rate of drying was greatly accelerated in the past ten years due mainly to Turkey's vigorous dam-building activity. Unless the three countries that share the rivers are willing to return to international agreements on water-sharing, southern Iraq will revert to desert once more. Such region-wide abandonment has happened several times in the past five thousand years, as we have demonstrated in part through excavation at Nippur, but it should not be repeated.

Despite the gloomy outlook, we do continue to hope that reason will eventually prevail in the matter of water, and that the embargo on Iraq will be lifted so that scholarly work can become possible once more. Until thenwell, there are the publications to do.

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