

was one of many politically autonomous regions in the alluvial plain of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers to the south. In the flat expanse of deserts, marshes, and cultivated fields of the alluvium were located the old urban centers of Mesopotamian civilization. But in this region, tribal groups have always been as influential as the bureaucracies of cities and states that come and go. And so it was now, in the mid-eighth century B.C. The power of vigorous tribal groups overshadowed these once dominant centers. From the capital, Babylon, to where the rivers met the sea, the water of the Euphrates and its canals belonged to sedentary tribesmen known as Chaldeans, who tilled the land and cultivated date palms. The lucrative Gulf trade was also in their hands. The uncultivated countryside was also inhabited by tribesmen, migrating peoples called Arameans, who herded flocks of sheep and goats. Their pastoral orbits took them in and out of fertile Chaldea, the highlands eastward, the upland plains of Assyria and the Khabur, and the tamarisk jungles and flood plains along the incised valley of the Euphrates, from where it enters the alluvial plain as far as the Turkish frontier. In addition, tribes of camel herding nomads came each year from the great deserts of the west to the border of Chaldea for summer grazing. None of the important old



**STEVEN W. COLE'S** dissertation concerns Nippur in late Assyrian times (ca. 745-612 B.C.). He has put together a rough portrait of Nippur during the mid-eighth century B.C. based on information taken from an archive of unpublished Babylonian letters excavated by the Oriental Institute Nippur Expedition in 1973.

In the mid-eighth century B.C., just before Assyria sought to bring southern Mesopotamia into her burgeoning imperial realm, Nippur



cities (towns, really) of this region was situated very far from the orbit of at least one of the important tribes. Nippur itself was on the border between Chaldean and Aramean dominated territories — between the fertile riverain districts of the Chaldeans to the west and south and the arid domains of the Aramean pastoralists who roamed eastwards.

Like Babylon and Uruk, Nippur maintained many of the old urban religious and cultural traditions to which she was heiress. But long alone in a tribal sea, Nippur was now strongly influenced by peoples whose social and political loyalties were expressed genealogically and who possessed strong traditions of independence. The tribes and towns of the alluvium were brought together by ephemeral alliances, not by support of a common leader. Yet in spite of this apparent lack of political unity, the markets of the region traded in a luxuriance of goods that only an expansive, stable network of cooperative trade could engender.

When the armies of Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria entered the alluvium in 745 B.C., they confronted towns and tribes ruled by independent-minded governors and sheikhs, some of whom paid nominal allegiance to Babylon, but most of whom did not. They were united not by a common ruler, but by a common interest in unobstructed commerce; almost all, however, joined in resisting the new Assyrian presence.

Later, in the seventh century B.C., Assyrian influence came to pervade almost every aspect of political life in Nippur, but loyalty to the tribe dominated the hearts and minds of the vast majority of its people. Caught between the well-nigh irresistible might of Assyria and these ties to local kinsmen, Nippur evolved turbulently during this period, from a town on the tribal frontier to a large city under direct Assyrian control. Cole's dissertation will describe Nippur during these years.