

## NIPPUR EXPEDITION

### McGuire Gibson

For yet another year, the Nippur Expedition has not been able to resume its work at Nippur. The embargo of Iraq drags on, making the life of ordinary Iraqi people increasingly desperate, and, less importantly, also preventing our return, although the Iraqi Department of Antiquities would welcome us.

We were somewhat alarmed a couple of months ago when a German colleague reported that he had been told of illicit sales of Nippur objects by rug dealers in Diwanayah, the closest large town to the site. One result of the embargo is a revival of illicit digging at archaeological sites on a scale that has not been seen since the Ottoman period. We hear reports of gunny sacks of cuneiform tablets being offered to antique dealers in Jordan. Much of the digging is being done by people who have lost their normal incomes as a result of the war or the embargo. They sell the objects for very little money to merchants who transfer them to antique dealers in Baghdad for a bit more money. Eventually, the items are smuggled out through Iran or Jordan for sale in the European, American, and Japanese markets. Thousands of newly excavated items are appearing in these markets alongside some of the three thousand antiquities that were looted from Iraq's regional museums during the uprising after the Gulf War. In antique shops in Jordan and London, I was recently shown dozens of cylinder seals, cuneiform tablets, and other objects, including a (probably fake) head of Gudea, the ruler of Lagash. All these objects are stolen and any academic, collector, or museum buying them or aiding in the purchase is engaged in illegal acts, but the market is brisk and one or two of our British colleagues do not hesitate to translate and authenticate the tablets, the cylinder seals, and other objects, leaving their signatures on the papers of authentications with the dealers. Even in Britain, that is called abetting a felony as well as aiding in the violation of the economic boycott on Iraq since these objects are considered to be products from Iraq; you cannot buy even Iraqi dates right now without committing a crime. Usually, the antiquities dealers in Europe and the United States will furnish bogus papers that claim the objects have been outside Iraq (or Syria, Jordan) since the early 1970s. In some countries, that is important since such papers might show that the objects were in Europe or the United States before the signing of the UNESCO agreement on cultural property. But since it has not been legal to export any antiquity from Iraq since the 1930s, almost all Iraqi items on the market are still more likely than not to be stolen.

A friend in Baghdad has gone to Nippur and has examined the site thoroughly and says that the guard is in place and that there is no evidence of illegal digging. Perhaps someone has found things on the surface and has taken them to Diwanayah, but more probably the dealers in Diwanayah, knowing that something from Nippur would fetch a higher price, are selling things from other sites and claiming that they are from Nippur. My friend does report, however, that the expedition house at Nippur, which had not been robbed since the Gulf War, was entered a few months

ago and several important pieces of equipment were lost. Among the items were three typewriters, two surveying instruments, an electrical generator, and the kitchen stove and refrigerator. We can replace most things with a lot of trouble and expense, but the surveying instruments are a special case. These are so old that they are antiques, having been bought by James Henry Breasted in the first decade of this century. I am not absolutely sure how they got to Nippur, but I think they were in Egypt until the Abu Simbel project and were returned to Chicago in the late 1960s; they were then taken to Nippur for use there. We were intending to bring them back for deposit as antiquities in the Oriental Institute Museum.

While we hope for a lifting of the embargo on Iraq, and occasionally there seems to be some progress on that front, we carry on our work here in Chicago by writing up the final reports. During the summer of 1994, I will try to finish the volume on Area WG, the operation that was designed to gain information on the shift from the pre-Islamic to the Islamic period at Nippur. It is an important piece of work because there is no really good published sequence showing the archaeological correlates of this critical change in history. I have most parts of the report in manuscript, with only a chapter or two to finish. On other operations, I can report that Augusta McMahan has used material from her dissertation, devoted to Area WF, to write two articles on the Akkadian period and is still revising the entire dissertation for eventual publication in the Oriental Institute Publications series. James A. Armstrong has finished revisions of his volume on the first millennium at Nippur and that volume should appear in print in a year or so. He is spending the summer of 1994 in Ghent, Belgium, putting the final touches on the corpus of second millennium pottery that the Nippur Expedition has been involved in for more than five years. I am happy to note that Armstrong has been appointed to the position of Assistant Curator at the Harvard Semitic Museum. This position will involve him in field work as well as curatorial duties.

During the year, Nippur lost a devoted supporter with the death of Mrs. Carolyn Livingood. I remember vividly my first close contact with her, when she visited Nippur with her husband, Jack, in 1964. Her deeply-felt love of archaeology, her enthusiasm for Near Eastern civilization and for the Oriental Institute, and her advocacy for them were apparent even to a graduate student in his first field season. I know she felt a greater kinship with the ancient Egyptians, but she was able to feel almost as great a fondness for Sumer. She was instrumental in helping to set up the Friends of Nippur and her generosity was constant, even when the expedition could not go to the field. In an age of hype and hypocrisy, she was a genuine and honest friend.

I wish to close on a note of gratitude to all the Friends of Nippur who have continued to contribute to the Nippur project, even in its period of exile. These contributions make it possible to push ahead faster on the publications. It is the reports, after all, that stand as the permanent monuments of archaeological work. Without them, it is pointless to do the digging at all. When we are able to return to Nippur, we will be able to renew our work without so great a backlog of publications.

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