

NIPPUR AND UMM AL-HAFRIYAT

McGuire Gibson

Once again, the past year's news on Nippur has not been good, nor are future prospects of work there optimistic. As far as I can tell, there is no looting at the site and there are supposed to be several guards from the new Antiquities police as well as our own two guards on the site. But all my information is second hand, coming from our Iraqi agent in Baghdad, who hears reports when our guards go to Baghdad to get paid. Each time they make the trip, they put themselves in danger, so we may have to find a new way to pay them. There is also supposed to be a fence around the site, but whether or not it exists, or how much of the site is enclosed, or how effective the fence is all remain matters of uncertainty.

I indicated in earlier *Annual Reports* that the pottery-making site of Umm al-Hafriyat, out in the desert 30 km east of Nippur, has been virtually destroyed by looters. We had a very productive season there in 1977 and hoped to return for at least one more season but had to go to the Hamrin Salvage instead. In the late 1990s, when I was on a visit to Nippur, I heard that there was some looting at Umm al-Hafriyat. When I said then that I wanted to drive out there, I was warned not to. Abdullah Nur, the son of our deceased long-term guard at Nippur, was making a living driving a pickup truck as a taxi service to the villages on the fringes of the desert around the town of Afak. He said that he had been near Umm al-Hafriyat and could see men digging, but he was told that anyone who went close would be shot at. At that time, the Iraqi government held real power only in the cities and towns in the south but had lost all control of the countryside, especially out in the desert.

The degree of destruction at the site, both in the 1990s and after the 2003 war, was easily visible to me from a U.S. helicopter on May 17, 2003. Hovering over Umm al-Hafriyat, I could see that it was riddled with holes, some of them very fresh. I saw no looters on the site, but that is probably because the looters had decided that the site was no longer worth working on. Recently, a cuneiformist has told me that there are tablets from Umm al-Hafriyat in European and American collections. At the time that he saw them in a European dealer's shop, prior to their sale to the collectors, they were easily recognizable by (a) a tough clay that adhered to them and, more certainly, by (b) rare names that appeared in the texts. (Umm al-Hafriyat was developed as a pottery-making site because of the high plasticity of the clay there.) These tablets apparently came out of Iraq while the embargo was still in place. Technically, the collectors could be found to have broken the embargo, which forbade the import into the U.S. of any Iraqi goods. Perhaps, some day, they will be returned to Iraq. Whether anyone will ever be able to identify the cylinder seals and other objects that must have been found there by the looters is doubtful. In effect, the site of Umm al-Hafriyat, for which we still do not know an ancient name, unless the cuneiform scholars who abet the collectors and dealers can suggest one, is now lost to field research.

Umm al-Hafriyat was a wonderful site, one of the few at which we could say that we had evidence of an industrial purpose (pottery and baked brick making). It was at this site that we became fully aware of the tremendous role of the wind in deflating not only the surface of the silt desert but also the sites themselves. We had not appreciated before that fact that the wind, more than the rain, can remove meters from the tops of tells, and on the open plain it can take away so much that it reveals the traces of ancient canals, going back even to the Uruk period (ca. 3200 B.C.). Our estimate was that in certain conditions, the wind takes away as much as 40 cm from the surface in twenty-five years. The silt that it removes is deposited in dunes until new irrigation canals allow the re-watering and reduction of the desert. Fields patterns, even furrows, also vis-

ible on the surface in this area might also be ancient rather than Islamic. If archaeologists can ever get back into the country to work before the desert is transformed by new development projects, it will be possible to study sites in relation to their fields. But that will probably not be the case anymore with Umm al-Hafriyat. I saw two farmhouses on the site, and much of the area around was being planted. There is no one to enforce the law that forbids the looting of objects, much less the occupation of sites.

Here in Chicago, we continue with the slow, meticulous preparation of reports on work we did at Nippur from 1972 until 1990. Each summer I keep thinking that the volume on which we have made the most progress, *The Sasanian-Islamic Transition*, will be done as I write the *Annual Report*. Finally, it does really look close. My student assistant, Alexandra Witsell, has finished all the work on the pottery illustrations, which will make it possible for us to go through them for final presentation. This is the last part of the manuscript to be finished. Next in line is the Umm al-Hafriyat report. I had been putting this one off, despite its great wealth of information and fine objects, until I had a chance to do one final season there. Since further work is now impossible, this will be the next volume.

We are still trying to document the objects, especially the cylinder seals from Nippur, that were stolen by looters from the Iraq Museum in April 2003. Clemens Reichel and Karen Terras have posted on the Oriental Institute Web site those items that we can identify from the Nippur and Umm al-Hafriyat records, using a list of stolen objects compiled by the Iraq Museum. Occasionally, we have been able to spot in an auction catalog or a publication some object from Nippur, the Diyala, or from other sites, and we have given the information to the Iraq Museum, Interpol, and the F.B.I. So far, I do not think there has been much action on these tips, despite the best efforts of the Iraqis.

The situation for archaeology in Iraq, like the chances for a normal life for the people of Iraq, looks grim. The looting and destruction of hundreds of sites, especially in the south, continues unabated. Even in the north, where sites are still relatively untouched, there has been massive damage at the great Islamic capital of Samarra, 90 km north of Baghdad. This site, of which the modern city of Samarra is a small remnant, stretches 25 km along both sides of the Tigris, mainly on the eastern bank. Serving as a second capital of the Abbasid empire for less than a hundred years in the ninth century A.D., this site is easily visible from the air although not much stands up above the plain at present. Here, it is easy to see huge palaces, barracks, blocks of residential buildings, individual villas, two important mosques, and two spiral minarets, as well as racecourses. Unfortunately, Samarra has been the scene of major fighting in the past three years, and as a result, the U.S. forces have created a "berm," or a long mound of dirt, more than 3 m high, running for six miles through the ancient city to enclose and control traffic into the modern town. The fact that about a month after the berm was done, someone blew the golden dome off the historic mosque in the modern town, indicates that the berm did not function very well. The berm was created by having bulldozers dig into the ancient site for the material to make it. Since the site, in most places, is only about a meter deep, the machines did great damage to many buildings. The berm runs right through the western half of the famous quatrefoil-shaped racecourse. We can expect to find Abbasid artifacts, picked up on the berm and smuggled out, to appear soon in the international antiquities market.

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Reports that some of the insurgency is being funded by the illegal trade in antiquities has finally gotten the attention of the coalition forces, and maybe something will be done in order to save some of the sites. As it is, most of the great Sumerian cities have been destroyed or badly damaged, and some of the most important Babylonian cities, like Isin and Larsa, are also destroyed or badly damaged. This is in a country that, until 1990, had a better record for preserving its ancient sites than most nations in the world. Even in the 1990s, when there was little money for archaeology, the Iraqis still tried to stop the looting and were successful to a great extent. The destruction since April 2003 is unprecedented and on an unparalleled scale, anywhere.

We can only hope that the major sites that are now relatively safe, such as Nippur, Uruk, Ur, and Babylon, as well as most of the Assyrian sites in the north, will not be destroyed.
