

# NIPPUR EXPEDITION

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The 1991 invasion of Iraq was disastrous not only for the country but also for all the archaeological projects, including the Oriental Institute's Nippur expedition. Thanks to the efforts of McGuire Gibson, the former director of the expedition, and Christopher Woods, the director of the Oriental Institute, we secured a permit and resumed archaeological research at Nippur in April of 2019, after twenty-nine years of hiatus. During this hiatus, all the previous excavation areas had been filled, the dig house had been ransacked, and all the tools and furniture had been looted. The dig house is now restored and furnished, and the necessary tools are purchased.

The OI appreciates the financial contributions provided by its members and partners that have helped to support the resumed excavations at Nippur over of the past year. Special recognition is given to Catherine Novotny, Howard Hallengren, and an anonymous donor who established the endowed Ancient Near East Research Fund, all of whom provided major gifts this year for the important archaeological work by the OI at Nippur.

Because the entire post-Saddam Iraqi government has been changed and some new rules and regulations are implemented, the 2019 season of excavations was an exploratory one to assess the working conditions and feasibility for major exploration at the site. Accordingly, in the twentieth season we had a small team consisting of Abbas Alizadeh, director and field archaeologist; John Alden of Michigan University, field archaeologist; Andrew Wright of the OCHRE Data Service project, database manager, and drone operator; Hussein Hamza, a seasoned Iraqi foreman; three government representatives; and eight local workers. Chris Woods and Jean Evans joined us for a week at the end of the season.

Much of Nippur had always been covered with sand dunes, but now most of the dunes are gone, providing a great opportunity for us to prepare a new topographic map and high-resolution aerial photographs of the site using a quadcopter (fig. 1). The new images clearly show all the previously explored areas, robber trenches, and all the surface features that were hidden under the dunes, including the stumps of Ur III/Old Babylonian house walls on the southern tip of the West mound as well as an 80 m stretch of the remnants of the city wall there that had been exposed in 1892 by the Pennsylvania expedition (fig. 2).

Nippur was extensively pierced by tunnels and trenches, some 100 m long, from 1889 to 1900 by the Pennsylvania expedition. The massive amount of excavated dirt was deposited around the tunnels and trenches covering large areas of the site. The Oriental Institute expedition that began in 1948 also excavated large areas on the East and West mounds with huge amounts of back dirt. While in some parts of the mound, especially around the ziggurat, it is easy to distinguish the back dirt covering the actual mound, in many areas it is almost impossible to do so at ground level. The new aerial images are excellent guides in distinguishing the areas covered by the back dirt from the actual mound, which immensely help in choosing pristine areas for excavation.

The city of Nippur is divided into two parts by a wide northwest-southeast ancient irrigation canal, known as East and West mounds (fig. 1). Since irrigation canals were also used as waterways connecting population centers in southern Mesopotamia, it is reasonable to assume that quays and warehouses existed on the banks of the canal to receive, store, and distribute goods brought to the

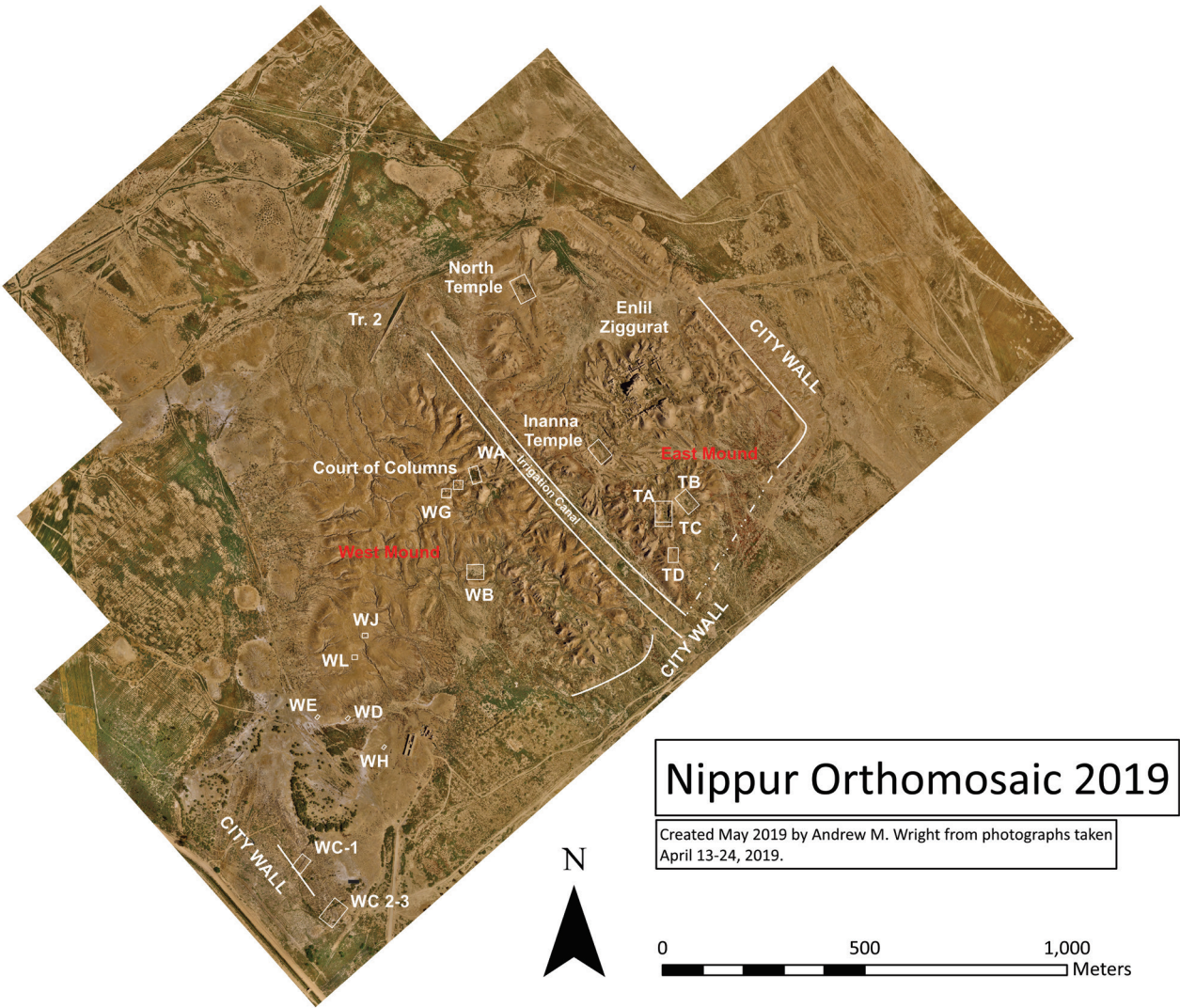


Figure 1. Aerial Image of Nippur showing all the areas excavated from 1948 to 2019.

city by boats. Since such structures have not been located at Nippur, we initially considered the idea of excavating a pristine area of the site on the western slopes of the East mound. But because such an operation required a much longer season, we decided to postpone this operation until the much longer season in 2020.

In the 2019 season, therefore, we chose two areas on the southern part of the West mound where surface signs pointed to the presence of architecture. Following the established tradition, we designated these two areas as WJ and WL, W standing for West mound—WK had been assigned to an area with traces of square mudbricks but was not excavated.

The main feature in WJ consisted of a north-south wall whose uppermost preserved layer was made of square and rectangular baked bricks of different sizes that seemed to have been cannibalized from other buildings in the area (fig. 3). The pottery associated with this latest phase belonged to early Islamic times (fig. 4). The baked brick wall had been built on top of a mudbrick wall that belonged to a late Sasanian house of which we only excavated its courtyard and the three fragmentary

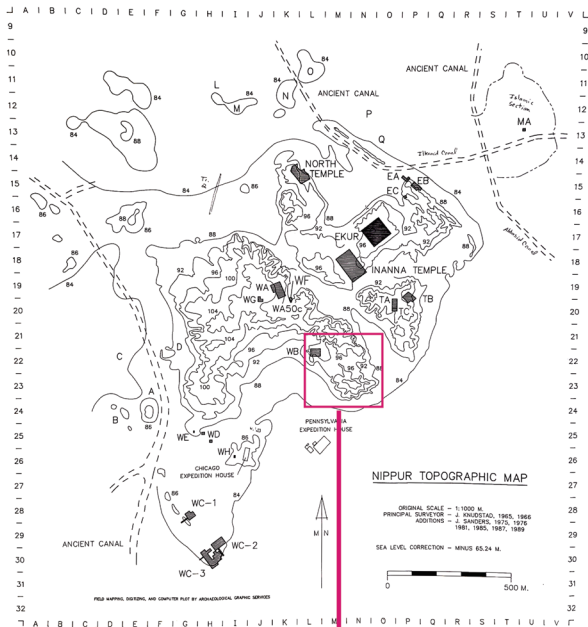


Figure 2. Aerial image of the southern tip of the West mound showing remnants of Old Babylonian walls and parts of the city wall excavated in 1892 by the Pennsylvania Expedition.

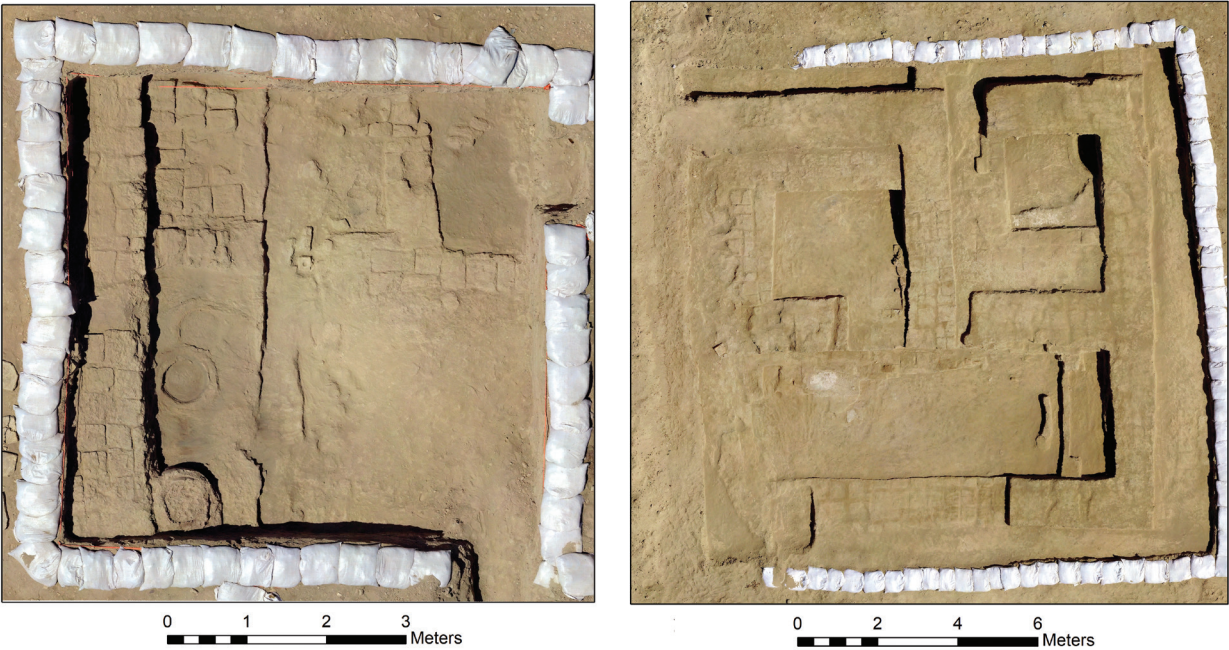


Figure 3. Top views of Trench WJ (LEFT), and WL (RIGHT).

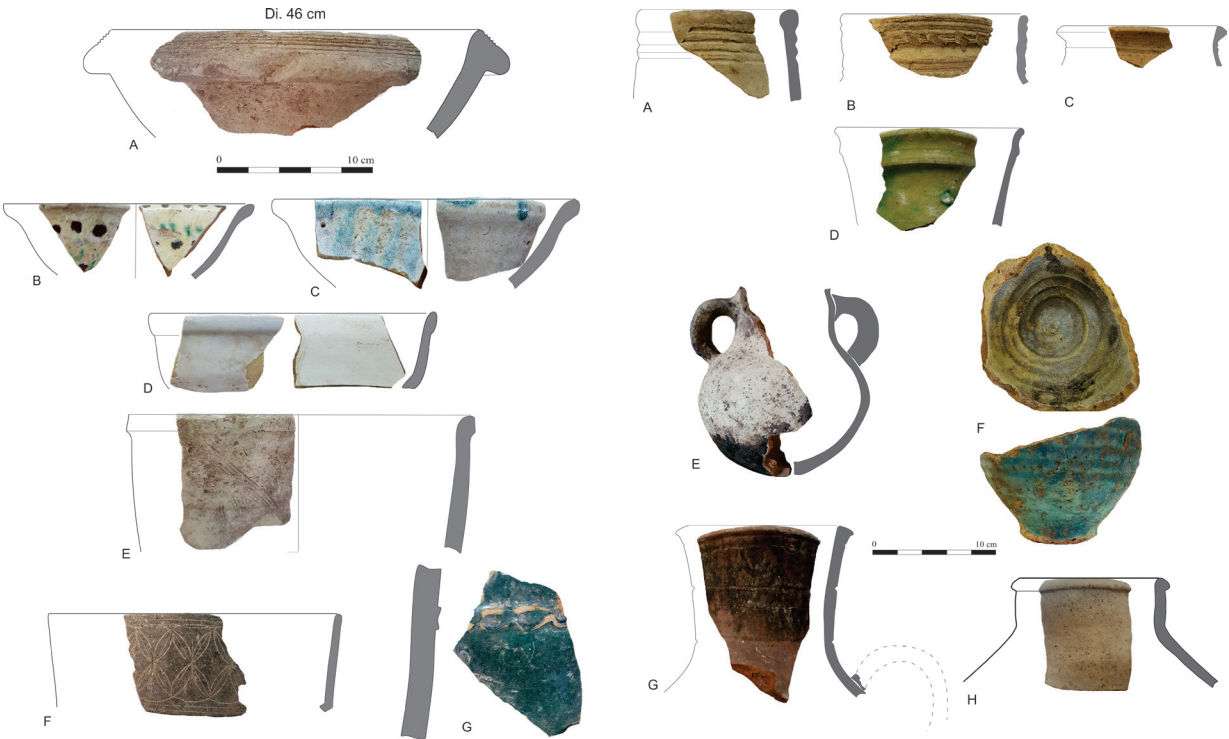


Figure 4. Left column A-G: early Islamic and Sasanian pottery from WJ (F: a steatite vessel). Right column: A-H Parthian pottery from WL.

walls surrounding it from the north, west, and south. Two bread ovens and burnt patches with ash were found in this courtyard.

Some 60 m southwest of Square WJ, traces of a major mudbrick building were visible in the aerial photos. We chose this area, WL, as the locus of our second operation. Here we uncovered a monumental building with walls between 1 m and 1.2 m thick with rectangular mudbricks and thick mortar (fig. 3). The bricks were made of sandy clay without any straw. As such, these bricks were fragile and difficult to articulate without the thick, 3–4 cm, mortar of darker shade that bonded them together.

A wide gully had cut much of the western part of this building, and we were able to excavate only two-thirds of the entire structure. Based on this exposure, the building consisted of a southern long room/hall with an entrance in the west of the southern wall, and two square rooms to the north. Traces of mudbricks under the remains of the uppermost phase indicated that this building was much bigger than what we were able to expose. In the exposed area, we distinguished three phases of walls and associated floors. All belonged to the late Parthian period (figs. 4–5).

The two floors we found associated with the walls were almost devoid of pottery and objects. In the long hall to the south and the eastern square room to its north, we found three clusters of broken pots. Surprisingly no bone or bone objects were found in the entire excavation areas, but fragmentary glass vessels were numerous. Two copper coins with completely eroded features were found in the square rooms.



Figure 5. LEFT: Parthian bronze pin (A), glazed jar and lamps (C–E), and a fragmentary incantation bowl with Arabic inscription (B), not to scale; RIGHT: Neo-Babylonian baked tablet of a house sale's contract, found on the surface of the East mound.

Both WJ and WL provide excellent contexts to explore domestic architecture in Parthian and Sasanian Nippur in future seasons.