NIPPUR EXPEDITION

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Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the University's administration introduced policies restricting overseas travel for academic staff and faculty who wished to conduct University-supported academic projects abroad. Under special and compelling circumstances, however, permission to travel would be granted. In April 2021, I requested a travel exception, which was granted in early May. I intended to have a short season with limited field activity with the help of local Iraqi archaeologists and workers, because due to the pandemic none of my colleagues from the U.S. or Europe could participate.

Figure 1. Restoration of the columns of the Parthian monumental building at Nippur.

Because the Ramadhan (the month of fasting) would end in mid-May, I planned to go to Nippur after Ramadhan during the third week of May and work for two weeks. Meanwhile, I had sent my old passport to be renewed. Much to my surprise and dismay, I was informed by the Office of Homeland Security that because of the huge reduction in the number of staff due to the pandemic, it would take more than eight weeks for my passport to be renewed. Eventually, after ten weeks, I received my new passport in early June, when it was simply too hot to go to the field.

I am hoping that the search to fill the Mesopotamian archaeology position be successful by the end of the summer, so that the new faculty member will assume the responsibility for Nippur. Otherwise, I believe it is imperative that the OI formally claim the two new sites of Puzrish Dagan and Tummal as soon as it is possible by excavating two small trenches, one at each site. (See the OI's *Annual Report 2019–20* [pp. 95–98] for the description of these sites.) The change of the guards at the Department of Antiquities of Iraq and the fact that some other archaeologists are very keen to secure permits to excavate these two important sites makes this plan urgent.

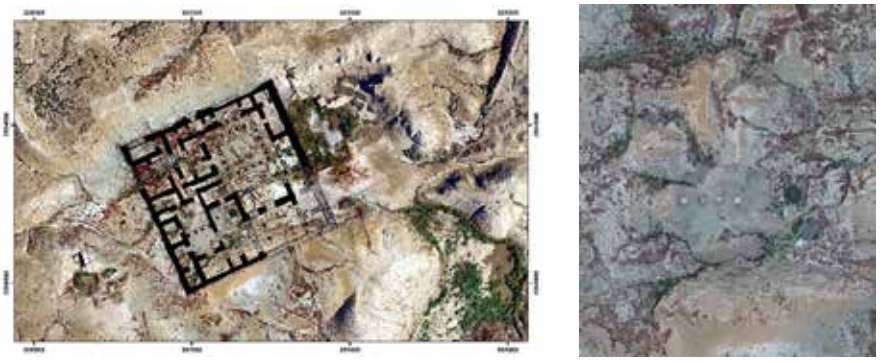

Figure 2. The location of the Court of Columns on the West Mound and its superimposed top plan.

Given the short time (two to three weeks) we will be at Nippur,

Figure 3: The University of Pennsylvania expedition's building on top of the ziggurat.

Figure 4. The state of preservation of the Nippur ziggurat.

Figure 5. Tamarisk/Tamarix trees.

we cannot embark on any major fieldwork, especially since we will not have a staff from the U.S. or Europe. In 2019, Iraq's Department of Antiquities, desiring to create a tourist attraction at Nippur, requested that we do some restoration on the ziggurat and on a Parthian monumental building known as the *Court of Columns*, on the West Mound, that was excavated in the late nineteenth century by the University of Pennsylvania expedition. The ziggurat and Court of Columns are the two architectural remains at Nippur that are still visible on the mound. In 2019 we solidified the remaining four columns and, with the help of a pipe, redirected the runoff water from this area (fig. 1). The Iraqi authorities requested that we articulate the remnants of the walls still visible on the mound so that Iraqi restorers could reconstruct the entire building (fig. 2).

The work on the ziggurat is more complicated and requires the expertise of Iraqi engineers. In 1896 John Henry Haynes, the official photographer of the University of Pennsylvania expedition, used baked bricks from the site to erect a brick building on the summit of the ziggurat, presumably for protection. The foundation of this building, now itself a relic, has been damaged by erosion, and further damage may result in its collapse (fig. 3).

We explained to the Iraqi authorities that the cleaning of the debris (wash) around the ziggurat and the restoration of the staircases (fig. 4) require the help of local engineers and that we will be happy to consult with them in carrying out this major task.

Another pressing issue at Nippur is the invasion of Tamarisk/Tamarix (*Tamarix aphilla*; Arabic ناصغألا ةيحن ةرجش ءافرطلا) trees on the site, especially on its southwestern part and in WA trench on the northern part of the West Mound, where the Gula temple remains buried. The roots of this invasive species can penetrate many meters below the surface and destroy archaeological remains (fig. 5).

WC trench is the locus of the Gula temple. The southwestern part of the mound is the location of WC 1 and WC 2–3 trenches, where in the 1970s McGuire Gibson discovered remains of the city wall and architectural remains of the Kassite, Old Babylonian, and Ur III periods. The U.S. National Park Service has used three methods to eradicate this plant: physically removing it, herbicides, and introducing tamarisk-eating beetles (*Diorhabda carinulata*). Of these methods, we can use only the first one safely and see the results. We will, however, discuss these options with the Iraqi officials when we return to the country.