

RESEARCH

NIPPUR AND UMM AL-HAFRIYAT

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Hopes for an early return to work in Iraq remain dim. The lack of security in Iraq makes any kind of fieldwork appear months or even years away.

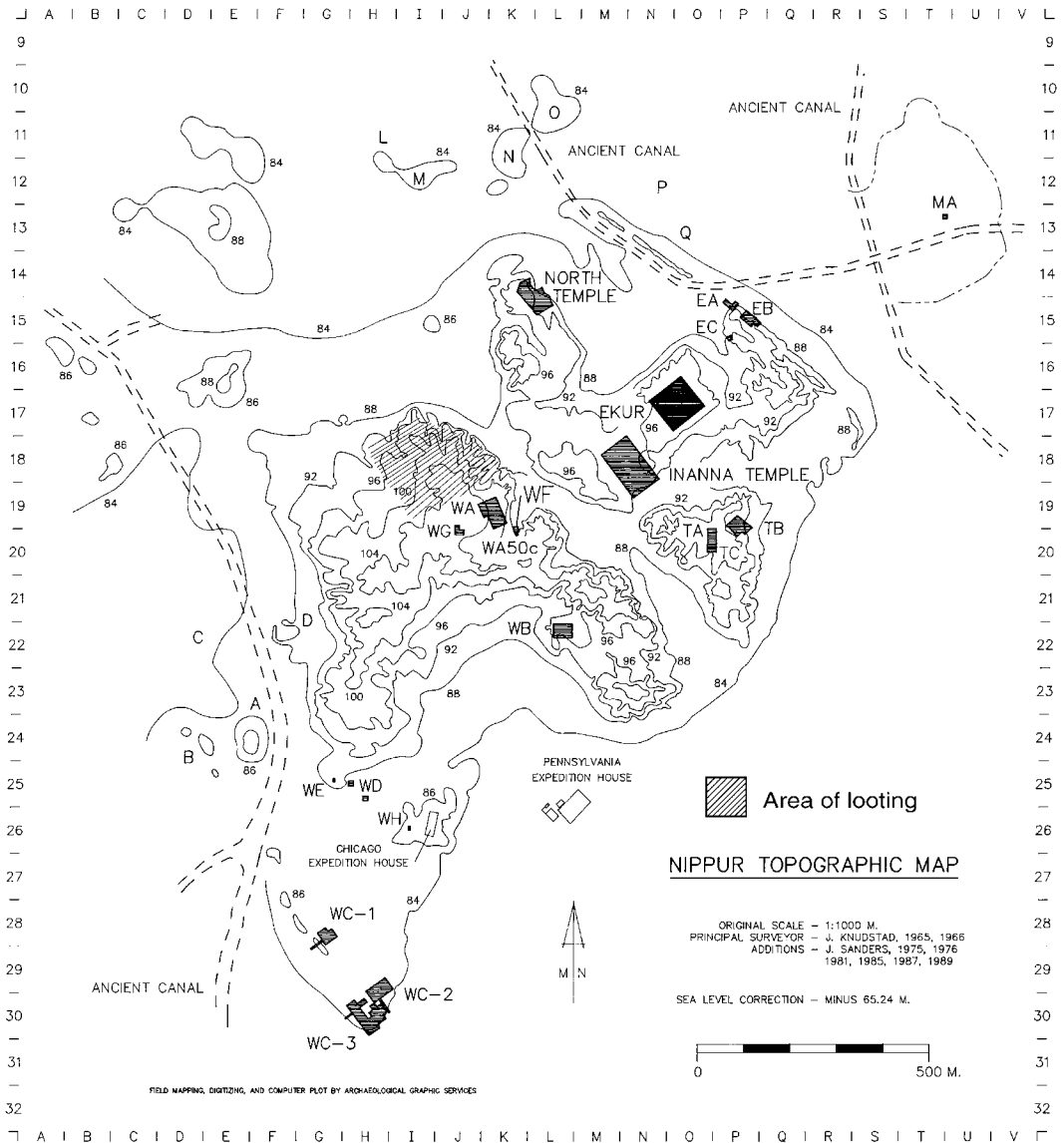
Umm al-Hafriyat

As recounted in last year's *Annual Report*, Umm al-Hafriyat has been very badly destroyed by looters working mostly in the past year, although some were already digging on the site in the late 1990s. When I viewed the site from a helicopter on May 21, 2003, I was able to see the enormous damage from hundreds of ragged holes throughout the site and I could confirm something that I had seen on satellite images taken in the past few years, namely that new irrigated farms have come into existence not only around but on the site. It is probable that we will not be able to complete the study of the 400 pottery kilns and related working facilities that we were able to recognize and map in 1977. We wanted to return to Umm al-Hafriyat for another season in 1978, but we were obliged to take part in salvage excavations at Uch Tepe, which was to be flooded by the new Hamrin Dam. In the 1980s, while the Iran-Iraq War was going on, the State Board of Antiquities considered it to be too dangerous for a foreign expedition to be in as isolated a situation as Umm al-Hafriyat, even though it is only 30 kilometers from Nippur. If any emergency occurred while we were at Nippur, we could pack and be on the superhighway to Baghdad within half an hour, and in Baghdad a hour later. Getting out of Umm al-Hafriyat



Site of Zabalam, southern Iraq, showing buildings excavated by the State Board of Antiquities with looters' holes all around. This photograph was taken in September 2003, but looting continues today. Photograph by John Russell

NIPPUR AND UMM AL-HAFRIYAT



Topographical map of Nippur showing approximate area of illegal digging (hatched area)

would take more than a day. So, nothing was done on the site in the 1980s, when it was still safe from irrigation and from looters. It is a pity we missed the opportunity because the site is one of the few Mesopotamian towns known to be devoted to industry — the manufacture of pottery and baked bricks. The site lies on the levee of an ancient Euphrates channel, and the clay at the site is extraordinarily plastic. Maybe something can still be done there. It would take an extended visit to make a careful assessment of the damage from looters' holes and from new fields. For now, Umm al-Hafriyat seems to be just another of the hundreds of sites of ancient Sumer to be destroyed in the past year. It is, as yet, an unidentified town, and even when it is identified, it will not have the historical importance of Adab, Shuruppak, Umma, Zabalam, Isin, and Bad Tibira,

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Nippur Ziggurat showing damage to Ashurbanipal baked brick façade. Looters remove bricks to look for those inscribed and discard those without inscriptions

all of which are virtually destroyed or very badly damaged. But the loss of the technological information that the site might have yielded is still major.

Nippur

Nippur was spared looting until early June 2003, when dozens of men drove off our guards and worked unhindered through July. At that time, Iraqi police, who had finally been established in the nearby town of Afak, came out to the site and stopped the digging. Reports by the local antiquities official indicate that the damage was limited to the northern part of the West Mound. It is not certain that these reports can be trusted. Unless one is familiar with the site and is willing to walk over all of it, the damage cannot be ascertained. A United States Marine unit visited and took photographs, and from those pictures, which were forwarded to me, you would hardly know that the site was looted. Of course, they only went to the ziggurat area and did not turn their cameras to the West Mound at all. At the ziggurat, looters tore off baked bricks from the Assurbanipal facing. They were looking for inscribed bricks, which are popular items on the illegal antiquities market.

In e-mails from a Spanish colonel who was in charge of the Diwaniya area (which includes Nippur), I learned that Nippur was going to be designated for special treatment by the occupying authority. I heard mention of an estimate for the building of a guardhouse and a fence around the

site. I urged him to check with the antiquities authority to get the cadastral survey of the site to make sure that everything that was archaeological would be included within the fence. The guardhouse was for the use of a new body called the Antiquities Police, which the occupying authority had decided to create. It is not clear how this new force will relate to the 1,500 or so guards on sites around the country, who are already paid for by the Antiquities Authority, nor to the guards paid for by foreign expeditions. I sent off several e-mails to the colonel, to the Coalition Provisional Authority, to the State Board, and to the man who acts as my agent in Baghdad and is supposed to keep track of the site, trying to get details on when and where the house would be built, what would be inside the fence, and what would be the relationship between the new guards and Nippur's own guards, whom the Oriental Institute continues to pay. I even sent a plan of the site, indicating what was and was not designated as antiquities land. I got no information. Finally, at a recent meeting at Petra in Jordan, I was able to speak personally with the State Board representative overseeing all sites, and more important, with the local Antiquities representative in the area around Nippur. It became clear that the central offices in Baghdad, up through June of 2004, had little or no information on or control over antiquities matters in the provinces because they had too few vehicles and no means of communication. Individuals in the Occupation Authority were making decisions about sites without consulting with the State Board, and it appears that they even ignored the American advisors in the Ministry of Culture who were installed to give advice on antiquities. That is why American and Polish troops were able to carve up parts of Babylon for helicopter pads and other installations without anyone questioning the advisability of making an antiquities site into an army base.

At Petra, the local Antiquities Authority representative for the Nippur area told me that a contract had in fact been given to a United States company to build the house and fence at Nippur. That company subcontracted with an Iraqi firm in Hilla, which showed up on the site in March with a bulldozer and began to demolish our expedition house. Our guard was able to stop the bulldozer but only after it had demolished our main gate and the entire wall on the right side of the gate, damaging and exposing the bathroom of the house staff. Our guard went to Baghdad to report to the Antiquities Board, which got the destruction stopped. The damage has not been repaired and our house lies open for thieves to take the steel railroad that is the only thing of value still in the house. I am trying to find out from my agent how this all happened, and why he did not tell me about it when it happened. I am also trying to get the repairs done and I need to find out which company got the contract so that we can make a claim for compensation.

The new guardhouse, of baked brick, has been built next to our guards' house, but it is unfinished because the contractor ran out of money. The fence was also put in, but I do not know yet where it runs, what it protects, and even if it has any wire on it. I suspect that in putting in the fence, they have probably left out part of the site, and they have merely supplied a new source of wire for the local farmers.

Publications

On a more positive note, we have made more progress on publishing our backlog of reports. Alexandra Witsell, a graduate student, is formatting the existing manuscript on the Sasanian-Islamic transition so that it will go more easily into the Oriental Institute editorial system. I still have to write a major chapter and rework the conclusions. I hope to get this finished in the coming summer. We are also looking over the Umm al-Hafriyat notes and plans, starting to lay out the plates. Our report may well be the only evidence of the existence of this site, given the damage done to it. I try to retain some optimism. Maybe the destruction is not as bad as it looks.

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It has become even more important to publish our backlog in light of the loss of objects in the looting of the Iraq Museum last year. The inventory of the museum storerooms is still not finished, and the number of definitely lost items has reached 15,000. About 4,000 objects have been recovered. Among the greatest losses were more than 5,000 cylinder seals, which have not been recovered. The latest detailed information from the museum gives some details on the places where the stolen seals had been excavated: Two hundred and fourteen are from Nippur and all of the nineteen seals we found at Umm al-Hafriyat are also missing. Also affecting the Oriental Institute is the loss of 424 seals from the Diyala sites that were excavated in the 1930s. These losses include some very famous seals, such as one in Indus-Valley style and another with gods battling against a hydra, both from Tell Asmar.

It should be emphasized that the losses from the Iraq Museum, which seem so huge, are small compared to the number of artifacts being ripped out of hundreds of sites in the south of Iraq each day. For more than a year, the great sites of Sumer and many smaller sites have been systematically plundered to feed the international market in stolen antiquities. The Iraqi farmers and laborers who are doing the actual digging are only trying to find some way to make a living in a country with no jobs. The fault is not theirs, but lies with the dealers and collectors who drive the illegal market. The loss of objects is bad enough, but the destruction of the ancient sites, with their precious information on the context of the artifacts, is far more damaging. By destroying their past, the Iraqi diggers unknowingly destroy their futures, because if left intact these sites would be the source of employment in excavation and tourism for centuries to come. The loss for Iraq is thus enormous, but it is a loss to world heritage as well. In a narrower sense, we academics are losing the basis for our entire field. Even the most beautiful object or the most informative text is worth only a small fraction of what could be learned if the item had been left in the place where it was used or at least discarded in antiquity.

The occupying forces have proven incapable or unwilling to stop the looting, although millions of dollars have been given in contracts which create schemes that do not seem to materialize. The tragedy for Mesopotamian archaeology continues unabated, and the situation will not get better until a real Iraqi government is in place, including a strong Antiquities organization, with power to enforce the law. The Iraqis have had an outstanding record of protecting their archaeological heritage in the past, and I hope they will be allowed to do so again.
