

## NIPPUR AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN IRAQ

McGuire Gibson

Iraq continues in a state of chaos, and the archaeological sites in the south of the country are still being looted. More than two years of constant digging have destroyed many of the most important Sumerian and Babylonian cities. Umma, Zabalam, Bad Tibira, Adab, Shuruppak, and Isin are only the most prominent cities that we know have been riddled with pits and tunnels. Hundreds of other, as yet unidentified or less-known sites, such as Umm al-Hafriyat, Umm al-Aqarib, Tell Shmid, Tell Jidr, and Tell al-Wilayah are equally damaged. I have just been told by a very brave German archaeologist, who is married to an Iraqi and has recently returned from Iraq, that the diggers are moving north to the vicinity of Baghdad. One of the sites she mentioned is Tell Agrab, in the Diyala Region, which the Oriental Institute investigated in the 1930s.

There are other sites among the ones mentioned above that have a connection with Chicago. Adab (Tell Bismaya) was excavated by Edgar James Banks for the University in 1904/05, before the Institute existed. Umm al-Hafriyat was a remarkable site out in the desert 30 km east of Nippur, where I worked for a season in 1977. This site is located on an ancient river levee that has remarkably plastic clay, and it was because of this resource that the site existed. We mapped more than 400 pottery kilns in and around the town, and we also located at least one brick kiln. We wanted to put in one more season at the site, but circumstances and the decisions of the Antiquities authorities made that impossible. The last time I saw the site was from a helicopter in May 2003, when I could see that it had been very badly damaged by illegal digging. No men were working there that day, but at the nearby Adab, I counted more than 250 men scattered over all parts of the site.

Nippur could have suffered the same kind of damage, and in fact there were twenty or so men digging illegally on the northern parts of the site for the months of June and July, 2005. I traveled there by car on May 17 and again by helicopter on May 21, and although there were four illegal holes, no real damage had yet been done. I paid our guards and visited the local shaykh and got assurances that the site would be safe. One week later, the looters came and, since they outgunned our guards, they were able to work unhindered for two months. On the

Hatra Core Area



Compiled by the Global Heritage Fund Mapping Team 2005



0 0.25 0.5 1 1.5 Kilometers



## RESEARCH

road trip that I took with a National Geographic team, I went to Diwaniyah in order to see the American colonel in charge of the province, but he was out of his office. In later e-mail correspondence, he claimed that there was no looting of sites in the province, despite a report of a UNESCO team in early June and much newspaper and television coverage of the extensive damage at Isin, which is no more than 15 km from Diwaniyah. At about the same time, I was getting e-mails from a Marine saying that cylinder seals, cuneiform tablets, and other antiquities were being sold openly in the bazaar in Diwaniyah, and that U.S. service personnel were buying them. I removed all identifying information from the message and sent it with a note to the Pentagon official with whom I had met before the war, asking what had happened to the order that the Defense Department was supposed to have issued forbidding the collecting of “souvenirs” including antiquities. I got no reply from the Pentagon, but two weeks later, the Marine sent me an e-mail saying that his commander had ordered him to cease all correspondence with me. They had figured out who had sent the message. Is all military e-mail being read, or is it mine? The lieutenant said that he would get in touch when his tour was over and he was back home in New York. A few months later, I did receive another e-mail from him, and this time he said that just to show that it was easy and routine, he had bought some cylinder seals in Iraq and had brought them back to New York. He wanted to make the trade in antiquities public, and he wanted to turn the seals over and send them back to Iraq. But, at the same time, he did not want to end his career in the reserve. I advised him to take the seals to a colleague in New York to make sure they were real, and then to get in touch with Colonel Matthew Bogdanos, the man who had led the team of investigators in the looting of the Iraq Museum. Bogdanos, when he is not in uniform, is a prosecutor in New York. I heard nothing from the lieutenant, but in spring of 2005, there was a piece in *The New York Times* indicating that a unit of the FBI, recently set up to track antiquities and art theft, had met with an unnamed soldier in a parking lot in Philadelphia to retrieve the seals. The seals were then put on display at the University Museum and they will be returned to Iraq at some point. The story was a publicity piece for the FBI unit, giving a rather distorted account in which the lieutenant was presented as a repenting villain instead of a hero, even though he and the colleague in New York had given the reporter the real story.

Nippur was luckier than other sites. After two months, local police came out from Afak and drove off the looters, who, I suspect, included some of our own former workmen. But the site also benefited from the attention of a Spanish colonel named Carmona, who was in charge of Diwaniyah when Spain took over that province from the Americans. Colonel Carmona saw the Oriental Institute Web site, with its Iraq Crisis postings, and got in touch with me. He wanted to know what sites were really important in the province. I mentioned several, but urged him to try to stop the wholesale looting that was going on. He made a genuine effort, visiting many sites and taking along the local Antiquities director. He also produced a written report on each site, describing the damage and making an estimate of what should be done to protect it. He sent me e-mails of those reports. His idea was to hire local tribesmen as guards, and to hire as many as fifty men for the major sites. In many cases, he probably would have been hiring the looters themselves, but it may have worked. A steady income without much work would have beat the hours of labor it took to dig many cubic meters of earth to find a major object. Unfortunately, the general plan was not implemented.

Carmona did, however, play a major role in urging the erection of the fence around Nippur and the posting of a number of the new antiquities guards, who occupy a new house on the site alongside the house of our own guards. I have no idea how the two sets of guards get along, or how they split their duties. I reported in last year's *Annual Report* about the near-demolition of our own dig house by an Iraqi contractor hired by a North Carolina company to build the new

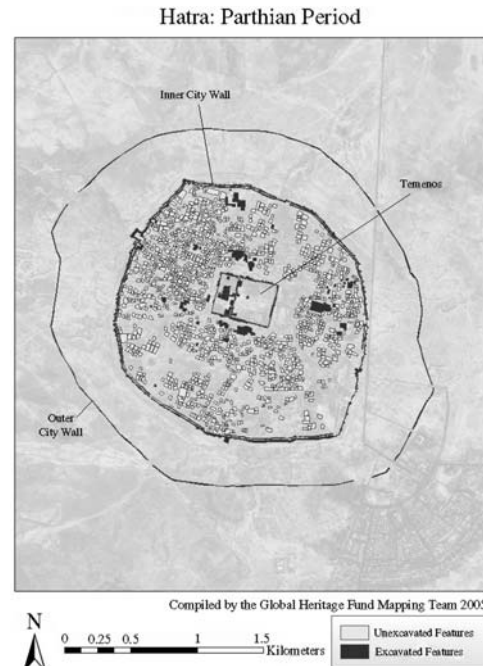
guardhouse. I still do not know if the damage has been fixed. I have asked several people to get photos of the new fence, the guardhouse, and our house, but so far I have had no luck. A U.S. Army colonel sent me an e-mail about six months ago saying that he was going to Nippur and he would report on the state of the site. I asked specifically for photos, and he said he would send a disk, but nothing has come. The man in Baghdad, who pays our guards when they go to Baghdad to get their pay, tells me that they report that everything is okay and the site is safe. They ask that we return and say that we would be safe digging there. Maybe, but I don't see it happening for some time to come.

The new antiquities guards at Nippur are supposed to protect nearby sites also, and maybe they are doing that. One or two mounds north of Nippur, which had been very badly damaged, may now be safe, but I have no way of knowing that.

The lack of information on conditions in Iraq is the most frustrating aspect of the situation now. We have only hazy ideas of what has happened in the repair of the Iraq Museum and the offices of the State Organization of Antiquities, on which millions of dollars are supposed to have been spent in the past two years. The museum has gotten all the media attention, but the complex of buildings is actually much more than a museum. Here are the 120 offices of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, charged with the oversight of all antiquities sites and objects as well as about twenty museums, and national heritage, that is, objects and buildings that are less than 200 years old. The State Organization part of the complex also houses an auditorium and a library. All excavations, surveys, and other research by Iraqis or foreigners are handled by the State Organization. In their offices are the photos and plans that every expedition is obliged to deposit after each season of work. Here also are the photographic labs, microfilm archive, and so on. In the museum are the objects and anything related to them, including the object register, storage of artifacts, display halls, exhibits and traveling exhibits, conservation, making of replicas, guards, and space for scholars to work on artifacts.

I know that in 2003, an Iraqi friend got the contract to repair doors, windows, electricity, and other physical aspects of the complex, and he also painted the offices. If he had been given the contract to furnish the offices also, that would have been done immediately, but a decision was made to buy desks and other equipment, including computers, from Jordan. It took a much longer time to deliver a fraction of the needed office furniture, and it cost a great deal more to do so. A generator, or even two, was to be bought for the complex, and I think that was finally done.

I hear incomplete and conflicting reports on the installation of climate control, new network connections for new computers, laboratory facilities, etc. I know that a gift of forty or more four wheel drive cars from the Japanese, which were supposed to make it possible for antiquities directors in the provinces to patrol the sites in their areas, have arrived finally in Baghdad, but the last I heard, they were still sitting in the museum grounds. Probably the officials are afraid to send them out because they would be stolen. The museum itself is locked down, with storerooms



## RESEARCH

sealed up, sometimes by welding. The Library of the State Organization is open and functioning. Before the war began, the officials very wisely took the most important books, such as the older site reports and fundamental cuneiform studies, and put them in an air raid shelter more than 2 km away. The other books were arranged on the inner shelves of movable storage and the mechanism was closed up. The shelving was then welded so that it could not be opened, so even those books survived. All are now on their proper shelves and the staff can work on paper, even if objects are not available. Much of the work in the State Organization revolves around the restoration of order to the records that were scattered and damaged by looters. The museum staff is still working to assess the losses of artifacts, now known to have been more than 15,000. More than 5,000 have been recovered. Lists of museum numbers of stolen cylinder seals have been sent to scholars abroad, and I put Alexandra Witsell to the task of identifying those items that had been found by Oriental Institute expeditions. She has identified hundreds of Nippur seals and put them in a database with pictures from our own records. She has also done the Umm al-Hafriyat seals. It is harder for her to work on seals from expeditions that the Oriental Institute did not do, such as Ur, but in some cases she can find the publication photo and can add this information to the database. The file has been sent to the Iraqis, who will give the information to Interpol.

The loss of objects from the Iraq Museum and the disorder caused in the archives of the institutions makes it even more important that other countries act to halt the trade in antiquities. The U.S. government issued a ban on the import and trade in Iraqi antiquities, after the museum had been looted. Customs officials have seized major groups of objects at several airports, but the prosecution of the offenders is slow. There was one prominent case involving Dr. Joseph Braude, an economist who had written a book on what to do with Iraq's economy once the country was conquered. Dr. Braude went to Iraq to serve as an advisor to the occupation authority, and when he returned to New York, customs searched his bags and found several cylinder seals, including three with Iraq Museum numbers still on them. He was arrested and indicted. In the trial a few months ago, he copped a plea. As a result, he was sentenced to six months house arrest and two years' probation. Although a slap on the wrist, the sentence may have caused major collectors and dealers in the U.S. to think twice about buying Iraqi antiquities. I am afraid that it will not stop them for long. They will find a way around the ban.

In trying to find ways to help our Iraqi colleagues, we have become involved in a joint effort of the Global Heritage Fund (GHF) and the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities to prepare site management plans for up to twelve of the most important sites in Iraq, including Nineveh, Nimrud, Assur, Hatra, Samarra, Ctesiphon, Babylon, Ukhaidir, and Ur. With funding from the GHF, a group of students have been gathering written and published material on these sites and have scanned it and sent it to the Iraqi members of the team. They will use this material to write up the narrative. The students are taking satellite images of the sites, purchased by GHF, and analyzing them to create base maps that show the areas of excavated buildings as well as modern features that may intrude on the sites. They are also preparing regional maps to put the sites in perspective, showing road and airport access as well as any features that might be tied in as tourist destinations for the future. These maps and any plans of buildings, photos of important monuments, etc. will be sent to the Iraqis as well, and in the next phase of the project we will work together with the Iraqis to present the reports in Arabic and English. These documents, when finished, will be used by the Iraqis to make long-range plans for the sites as well as try to preserve them from encroachment by development. The documents will also be used in a presentation to UNESCO for World Monument status for the sites. We are planning a meeting for the Iraqi and American teams, possibly in Baalbek, Lebanon, next winter.

While we sit and wait for the situation in Iraq to improve, we are making progress on preparing publications. The book on the Sasanian-Islamic transition (Area WG), which I thought would be done two years ago, is still not finished because we have not completed the reworking of the pottery sequence. It was this sequence, after all, that had been the main purpose for doing the excavation at Area WG. The problem we are dealing with is one that faces any archaeologist who investigates transition from one historical period to another. The coming of Islam is normally pictured as a sudden, drastic change in which a new people from the desert of Arabia came into Iraq, the key province of the Sasanian empire, and conquered it in an amazingly short time. They were then able to rule it, apparently with little trouble. How were these nomads able to take over an empire and rule it so easily? The fact is that the Arabs were not new to the Sasanian Empire, or to earlier dynasties in Mesopotamia. Arabs had been part of the fabric of Mesopotamia since the Neo-Assyrian period, at least as early as 800 B.C. They traded with Mesopotamia, and beyond it. They settled in what is now Iraq and had even created a small kingdom at Hatra, near present day Mosul during the Parthian period. In the Sasanian period, there were other Arab kingdoms in Iraq and Jordan that were vassals of the Sasanians and Byzantines. In other words, Arabs had been in Iraq for a thousand years before the conquest and the conquerors knew what they were taking. Unlike the current American occupation of Iraq, the Arabs kept the Sasanian bureaucrats in place and were able to keep the country running with little disruption.

We draw a mental line between the Sasanian and Islamic periods, and that line comes to be reality in our minds. Scholars have published sets of pottery that they call Sasanian and Early Islamic, and when they do surface surveys they pick up that pottery and note which site has either Sasanian or Islamic pottery, or both. But nothing is ever that simple. When life continued at a site despite the change in rulers, the material culture did not change markedly for some time, although all classes of objects went through a very gradual evolution. The potters did not change their style of pottery just because Arabs had taken control of the government. Thus, the pottery that we call "Sasanian" is really from late in the Sasanian period and also from early in the Islamic period. Likewise, the pottery we had been calling "Early Islamic" is really from some time well into that period and it goes on into the next chronological division that we call Abbasid. In any transition, there will be a stylistic lag like this in all classes of objects. What is important is not the continuity of the older style but the introduction of new items that may reflect the new rulers. For example, instruments of administration like official seals and artifacts celebrating the new dynasty can be found in excavated buildings long before we can see any great changes in pottery and other utilitarian objects. Therefore, in our excavation we needed to chart the slow development of pottery types found from the lower levels to the highest. Against this summation of slow time, we could insert the coins that had been found in various levels. The first occurrence of specific types of coins furnishes the key to the actual historical transition to Islam. We have coins in good context, and although we cannot pinpoint exactly which level of dirt marks the arrival of the Arab rulers, we can say for sure that by a particular level they were already there. And that gives us enough information to show that there was a continuity of Sasanian types well into the Islamic period, with new types of pottery being introduced only gradually.

A preliminary presentation of the pottery proved, on more thorough analysis, to be flawed by the assignment of some material to a wrong level and only a partial illustration of the potsherds. We are now drawing the entire set of pottery and are arranging it in a new typology. Except for the pottery discussion and a revision of the conclusions, the manuscript is done, and we really are very close to turning it over to the editorial office. I am eager to start in earnest on the report for Umm al-Hafriyat. That volume will be, essentially, all that exists of that site, since it has been so badly destroyed by looters.

**RESEARCH**

To conclude on a slightly less pessimistic note, let me say that there are some signs of hope for archaeology in Iraq. The State Organization of Antiquities has been able to hire many new staff members, especially guards for sites. The staff in Baghdad, including the museum personnel, which had been reduced to a few hundred people during the sanctions of the 1990s, is now back to adequate levels. And the provincial offices around the country are once again fully staffed, often with very courageous and dedicated people who face verbal and physical threats in trying to protect sites. In addition, there are now more than 1,000 members of the new Antiquities Police. This guarding force is having some effect in the worst destroyed areas in the south. I hear, though, that as the looters are driven out of one area, they move to another. The problem will not be solved until order is restored to the country and people can make a living by means other than the looting of sites. That time may be some years away.

---