

NIPPUR

McGuire Gibson

For the first time since May of 2003, I visited Nippur as part of a trip to Iraq to assess the possibilities of resuming fieldwork. Several colleagues have been to the site in the meantime, and they have sent me reports that the site is being guarded and that there is a fence around it, but I could not get detailed information on exactly where the fence ran. What I found on my visit is that the site is safe, it is being guarded not just by our own guards, but also by a contingent of thirteen soldiers who live in a house that was built there in 2005. I could not find out exactly how it happened, but in the process of building this new guard station, the cinder-block house that I had constructed for our guards in the late 1990s had been demolished. Our guards live nearby. I assume that our guards' house was demolished at the same time in 2005 that a contractor, working under the orders of someone in the occupation authority, began to demolish our dig house, damaging the front gate and a small room next to it. I find it odd that even our guards' memories are hazy on the events. I know that neither of them wanted to live on the site, even after I had built them a new house.

The site itself is undergoing the usual natural erosion that occurs, but there is no man-made damage. The fence, consisting of a large tangle of barbed wire about five feet high and five feet wide and held in place by metal posts, runs around the entire site, even the small satellite mounds to the north, east, and west of the main mounds (see map). This fence and the guards have prevented any looting since they were put in place. I knew that in June of 2003, after I had last been there and found no evidence of illegal digging, some looters had been able to work for a few days on the northwestern slopes of the West Mound.

A UNESCO group inspected this damage and one of them sent me a photo. Shortly after their visit, the looting was stopped by patrols of soldiers that made periodic inspections, thus enforcing our own guards who had not been able to stop the looting on their own, being out-gunned.

In the past few years, there have been several inquiries from cuneiform scholars who are working on tablets with dubious legality in private collections or on tablets that were seized by U.S. Customs and are being studied before being returned to Iraq. The cuneiformists insist that, because of names and events mentioned in them, the tablets must come from Nippur. I knew that all of these tablets had been removed from Iraq in the 1990s, when thousands of tablets were looted from many sites and smuggled out of Iraq,

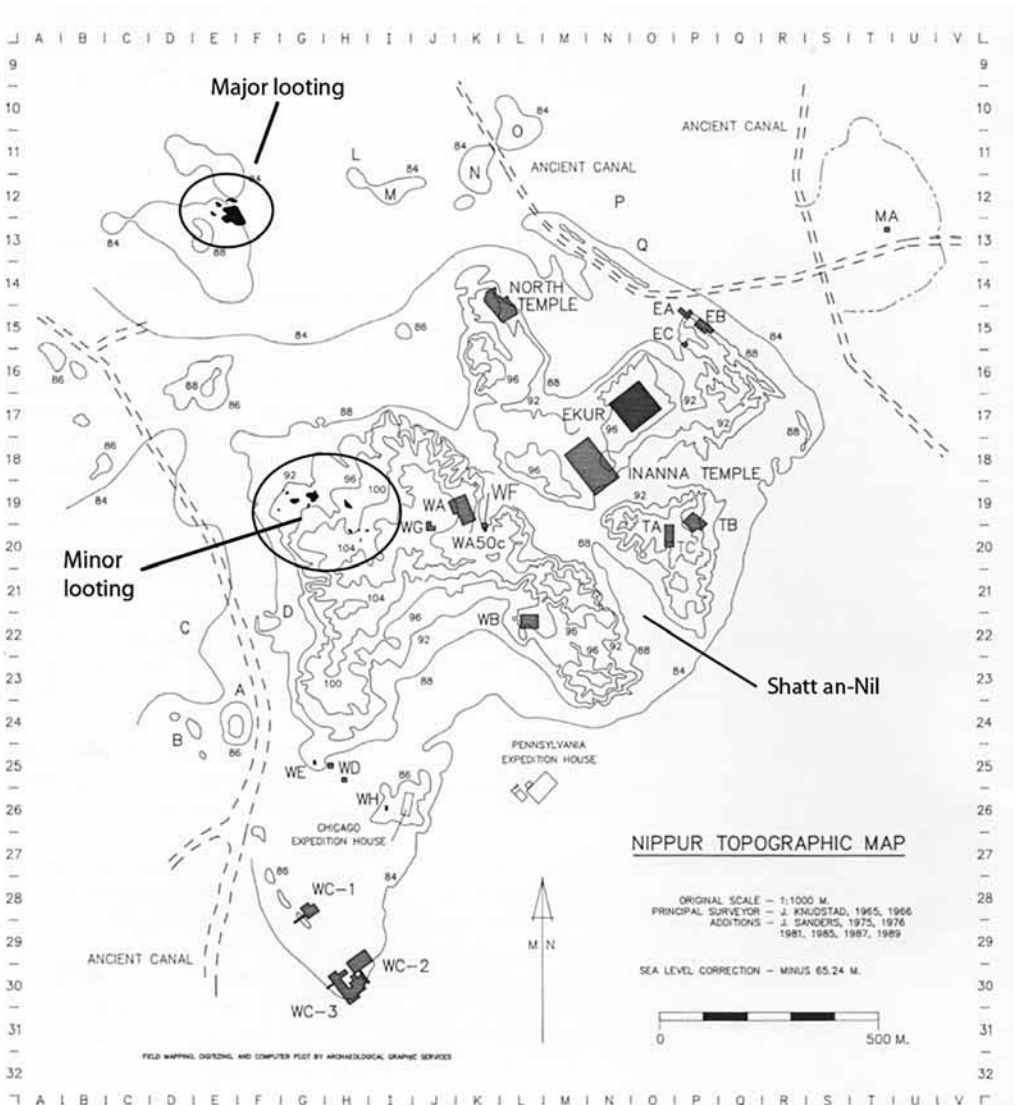


Nippur house in need of repair. From left to right: Ziara Abid, McGuire Gibson, Sayyid Thabit (Antiquities director, Diwaniya), Ibn La'ibi (local Antiquities representative), brother of Nippur guard, Wathiq Hindo (Nippur Expedition's agent in Baghdad), Abbas Garmoul (Nippur Guard). In background, unidentified man and another government guard



Government guard post next to expedition house at Nippur

Perimeter fence and road at north of site



Map of Nippur, with the areas of looting indicated. Adapted by Alexandra Witsell

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Looters' holes made in June 2003



Place where looters found Parthian coffins, West Mound

many ending up in the hands of U.S. collectors. But I was at Nippur every year in the 1990s and I walked over the main mounds each time. There were no looters' holes on the site until June of 2003. Therefore, those tablets could not have come from Nippur, although they may have come from a nearby mound.

My inspection this last May made clear that the looters in June 2003 did not do much damage on the West Mound, making only a few shallow holes in a limited area, and I gauged from the pottery around the holes that they did not reach levels that would have produced cuneiform tablets. A bit to the west, nearer the dry bed of the ancient canal that ran through the site, referred to by the local people as the Shatt an-Nil (Nile River), our guards showed me three holes dug by the looters in a place high up where huge Parthian foundations are exposed. Here, the looters had found slipper coffins, which are of a type that is made of ceramic and is formed like a slipper. The exteriors of the coffins were often decorated with floral and sometimes figural relief. Because these coffins were thick and were not baked very well, they are brittle and will break up into many pieces if you try to move them. Such was obviously the case here, because we found dozens of pieces of the coffins, some with decoration.

Where the looters had done real damage was to two small mounds at the northern end of the site (see map). I had been told that there was some damage here, and it is quite visible on satellite images. I did not visit these mounds during the 1990s, so it was possible that tablets did come from there, but I thought it was unlikely. Years ago, we did a surface collection of all parts of the site, and we concluded from the pot sherds on these two mounds that they were Sasanian and Early Islamic in date (ca. AD 300–800), long after cuneiform was being written. But there was a chance that we had just not found on the surface sherds of earlier periods down below. Although our guards assured me that the looting of these mounds took place only in June 2003, I wanted to inspect them. Accompanied by the director of antiquities for the Qadissiya province, who had come from Diwanayah that morning to meet us, as well as the local antiquities official from Afak, the nearest town, and our guards, we went to the northern mounds and spent more than forty minutes there. Although there are clearly visible signs of major digging, with holes going down three and four meters, there is no evidence of any occupation before the Sasanian. The tablets could not have come from there. Undoubtedly, some glass objects and a little jewelry, and maybe a few magic bowls with Aramaic writing on them, came out of those holes, but the amount of work it took to get them could hardly have compensated the looters for all the work.

I thought that some Kassite-period tablets that one scholar is working on may have come from a small mound to the south of Nippur, a little “tail” of our concession that is across the canal and has never been investigated, mainly because a local shaykh’s house was on it even as early as 1948. I made certain that this small mound has not been touched, so the tablets don’t come from there either. I suspect that they may have come from one of the mounds to the east of Nippur, within a half a kilometer. I did not have time to go there, being pressed to get back to Baghdad before dark and having to fit in a meal prepared by the family of our guards.

The meal was impressive and would have been impossible just a few years ago because the people would not have been able to afford it. At that time, there might have been chicken and stew over rice, but even that would have stretched their budgets. In addition to the normal fare, there were seven fish, baked next to an open fire on spits (*masgoof*). The guards houses are new, well built, and the guest room where we were entertained featured large posters of Shia holy men.

The evidence of a greater prosperity extended throughout the southern areas that we passed through. Everywhere, there are new houses already built or being built of baked bricks. Government money is being expended on irrigation projects and electricity, although still limited to a few hours per day, is working and lines have been repaired. Most amazing was the town of Afak, which is about 6 miles from Nippur. When we were going there annually, this had been a rather small town, with a government center and a one-lane bazaar. In 1990, there may have been 3,500 people living in Afak, and it became busy only on Fridays, when farmers came in to market. Now, the town has 50,000 people, and it is so changed that I got lost going through it, and we had to ask directions to the Nippur road. The very modest sports stadium is being replaced by a large, rather lavish one. There are hundreds of new houses, and more being built, almost all of baked bricks. We paid a special visit to the house of Ziara Abda Sadah, who as a young man worked for us as a pickman. He is now a contractor, with projects as far away as Nasiriya and Hilla. His house is large and as impressive as a house in Baghdad, with marble floors and other features that I never thought I would see in Afak. His fa-



Nippur guard, Abbas Garmoul (at left), in his guest house



A small part of the lunch

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Restaurant encroaching on super highway south of Baghdad

ther, Abda Sadah, whom I knew in 1964 as a lively teenager and who later became a pickman and finally our foreman, is now an old man, but there is still the spark that he always had.

The super highway that used to make it possible to do the Baghdad–Nippur trip in a little more than an hour, is holding up well, despite the tanks and other heavy equipment that have rolled over it since 1990. It was a beautifully engineered project, and even after all these years, it is not

pot-holed, although it is showing some cracks. The fences and guard rails that used to restrict traffic as on any superhighway, were removed during the chaotic 1990s, when the central government controlled little of the countryside. It was already too common an occurrence in the early 1990s to find a flock of sheep crossing the highway rather than being driven a mile or so to cross on a bridge. Now, there are no restrictions, and travel is slower. I was surprised to see a few of the upright supports that used to hold the guardrails. They are metal, and I would have thought all would have gone long ago. A few of the ungainly metal umbrellas that rose above concrete tables and benches in roadside rest areas still exist, but I never saw anyone use them in the past, and no one seems to do so now. The roadway on either side is now dotted with small and rather simple restaurants and mechanics' shops, with one or two larger, more elaborate restaurants in the places where such amenities were supposed to be set. All the little restaurants and shops are actually illegal, running right up to the pavement. I do not know if this road will ever be resurrected as a super highway. Now, it is just a very good road with six lanes of traffic.

Travel on the road is slowed a lot by numerous army and police checkpoints. Many are obviously leftovers from the U.S. occupation. Concrete barriers of three types are in evidence, and when made they had different names and different prices. The tallest barriers are about 7 feet high and 4 feet wide and used to cost the U.S. about \$1,200 apiece. Five footers used to cost \$800, and the two footers cost about \$400. Given the fact that there must be about a million barriers in the country, you can start to see where U.S. tax money went. For a while, the occupation was buying these things from Kuwait, but then had Iraqi contractors supply them, so there was at least a little benefit for some Iraqis.

Baghdad itself is a city of barriers. All bridges have checkpoints, and it takes an hour and a half, at least, to go from one side of town to the other. If you have an appointment on the other side of the river, you plan to do nothing else that day. Local people can take small boats across. This is a traditional service, with men using only oars as propulsion, but I did see a couple of boats with motors. The suspension bridge is taken up only for the benefit of people in the Green Zone, now called the International Zone. There are some areas with few checkpoints, but the backup from the existing checkpoints creates a massive gridlock from

about 9 AM until dark. Whole neighborhoods are walled off with the barriers, allowing entry only in a few places.

In contrast with other parts of the country, Baghdad is sad and frustrated. There has been a drought in the Middle East for years, and this allows the formation of large, frequent sandstorms that can take days to pass. Because the Turks have captured much of the water of the Tigris and Euphrates, irrigation is less extensive in Iraq than in former times, adding to the desert areas that feed the sand storms. There is an attempt to maintain and beautify the medians in the roadways, and the parks are being cared for, but the lessening of water is apparent. Although the signs above business buildings are grimy, stores carry much new merchandise. Air conditioners are piled five high outside the stores, and refrigerators, stoves, and other appliances are easily available. Because of the intermittent electricity, many stores, hotels, restaurants, and private houses have generators that go on and off automatically, as needed. In neighborhoods, people pay a fee to one or two people who maintain a generator for several houses. All these generators require fuel, and the price of gasoline, diesel, and kerosene are no longer heavily subsidized as they were under the Baath. Therefore, the electricity costs a lot.

The fuel for automobiles is also expensive now, but that does not stop the flood of vehicles coming into the country. Besides second hand and a few new European, American, and Japanese cars, there are many thousands of new cars from Korea, China, and Iran. The Korean cars have taken over the role that Toyota and Mercedes used to have, becoming the preferred vehicles that are well built and reliable. But the Chinese cars and trucks and the Iranian vehicles, which are much less expensive, are filling the streets. The present road system and the traffic control would not be able to accommodate this mass of vehicles, even without the checkpoints.

In general, not a lot of new building is taking place in Baghdad. There are lots of new banks, from various countries as well as from inside Iraq, and they tend to have new buildings, surrounded by barriers. But there are only reports on the construction of new hotels, or even the refurbishment of the old ones. It is a different situation entirely in Erbil, which I went to for one night in order to catch a plane the next morning. I had left the Baghdad-Erbil portion of the trip unbooked, because I was not sure how many days I would need in Baghdad. I had planned to go to Erbil for a few days to work with an Iraqi colleague, who would come over from Mosul. As it became clear that I would need to be in Baghdad at the end of the stay, I had my colleague come down to Baghdad, and we worked for a couple of days in our hotel. I began making arrangements to fly from Baghdad to make the connection in Erbil, but an Iraqi business man and close friend who facilitated my



Sand storm in Baghdad, June 2012

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Air conditioners for a city with dubious electricity

visit, convinced me that it took about the same time to drive to Erbil as to go to the airport, sit there, fly to Erbil, and sit there waiting for my flight. So, because he was driving to Erbil, I went with him. The trip took about six hours, with the checkpoints, but it was my first time on that road in about thirty years, so I enjoyed it. Not much has changed in the area from Baghdad to the edges of the Kurdish Autonomous Region. It is mainly a farming area, and we passed through only one or two towns before reaching Erbil. That city, in contrast, is amazing. You see what all of Iraq could be like if it had not had two wars and thirteen years of sanctions. This is a fully functioning city, much like Baghdad used to be, with well-maintained streets and parks, hundreds of hotels and restaurants and shops. There are two or three glass-walled high-rise hotels, and more being planned. I did not get a chance to visit the town, arriving in Erbil at about dinner time and going to bed soon after in order to get up at 2 AM to meet my taxi to the airport.

You can operate almost entirely on American money in Iraq, not just in Erbil. Everything is much more expensive than it was in 2003. We used to pay about \$3 a day in wages. Now the minimum wage is \$30 a day. Several foreign expeditions are already working in the Kurdish area, and an American group carried out a season of work at a small site near Ur this last year. Another that is sponsored by the Oriental Institute has the permission to dig at ancient Lagash (Tello), but the continued work of both these expeditions is being delayed due to internal Iraqi political decisions. An Italian group and a British group also have done or are about to excavate near Ur, so the delay is not affecting everyone. I would like to reopen Nippur, but the security situation needs to be made clearer before we can do that.

The increased wages that will make us think hard about how we budget for archaeological work in Iraq also explains how the ordinary Iraqi can cope. Iraqis are amazingly resilient and can still look to the future even when things are desperate. In general, I get the idea that the Iraqis can't wait for peace and stability and a chance to outdo the Gulf States in shopping malls, tall buildings, and a good life.