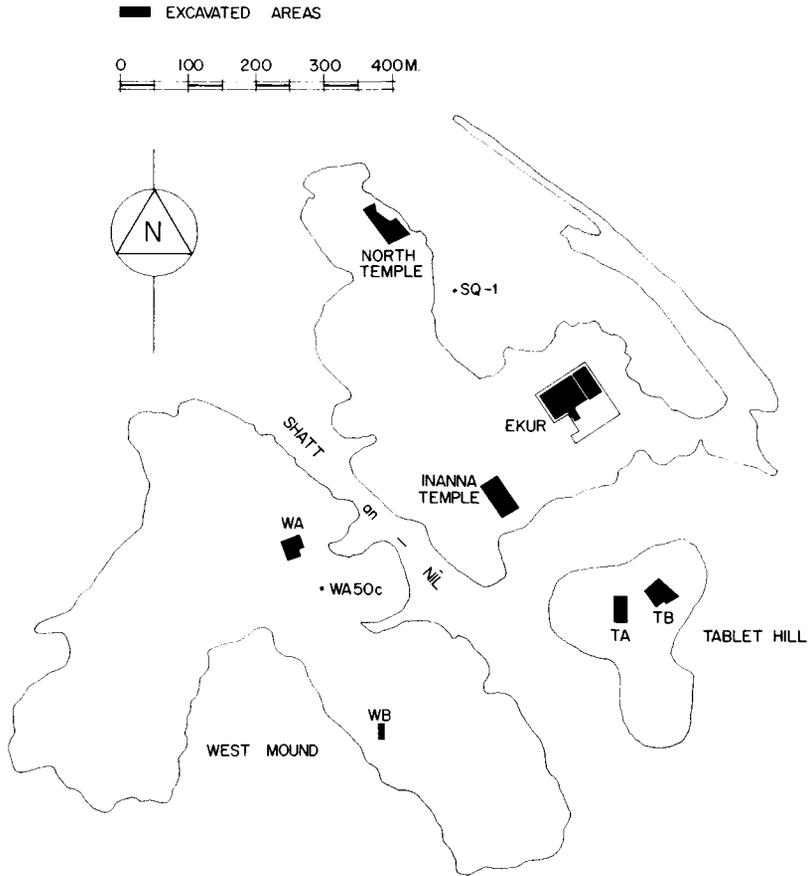


# Excavations at Nippur

McGuire Gibson

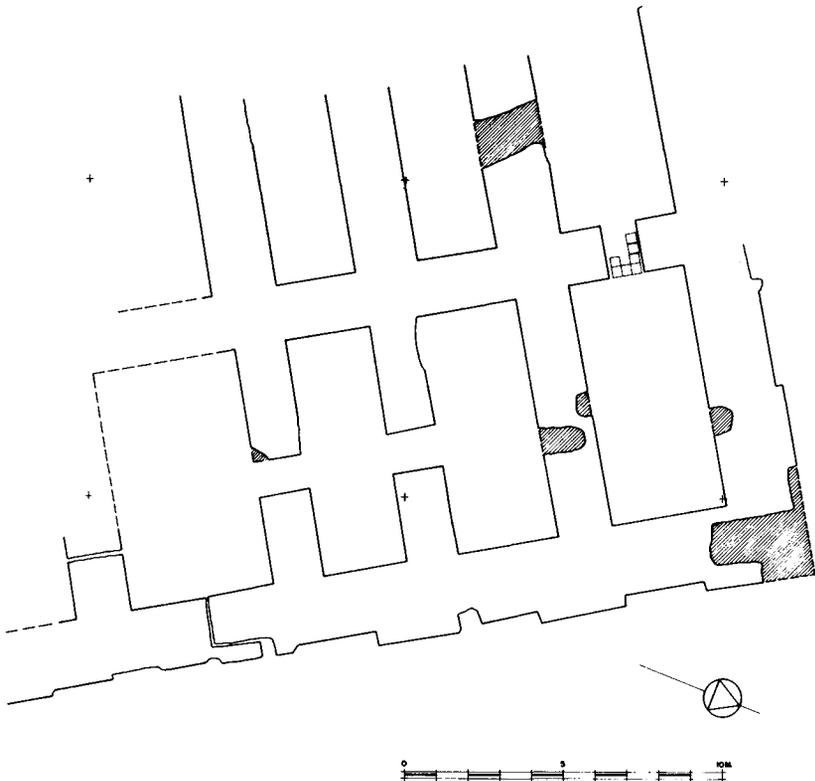


The Oriental Institute's twelfth season at Nippur, which lasted from September 20 to December 20, 1973, continued work begun in the previous year. In the current seasons, we are concentrating on the West Mound at Nippur, a part of the site not touched since the Pennsylvania excavations of 1889-1900. During the eleventh season, last year, an area, WA, was opened up beneath the remains of a Seleucid villa called the Court of Columns by Pennsylvania. Here, we

found parts of the outer wall and some rooms of a Neo-Babylonian temple. Beneath the Neo-Babylonian level, there were indications of at least three earlier versions of the building.

We also sank a stratigraphic pit, WA 50c, which yielded material from the Akkadian through the Seleucid era (2300–300 B.C.). South of these operations we excavated a section of Old Babylonian houses, Area WB, dated by tablets to the reign of Hammurabi and Samsuiluna (eighteenth century B.C.).

This season, we expanded WA and WB and our findings were very gratifying. In WA after removing part of a large sand dune, we excavated seven rooms of the Neo-Babylonian temple (date *ca.* 600 B.C.). There was evidence of two major fires and subsequent repairs in the



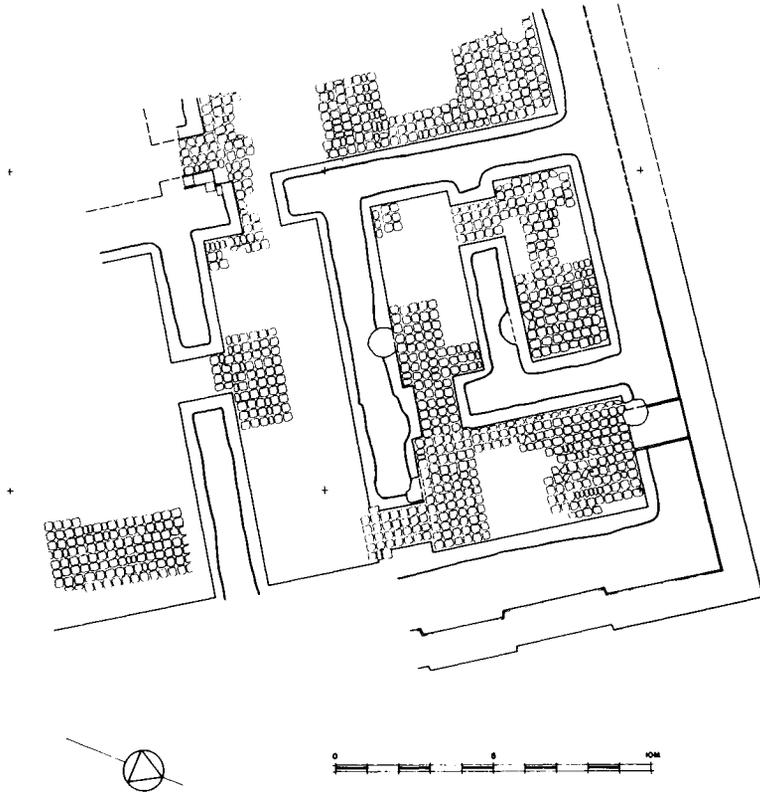
*Plan of temple in WA, Neo-Babylonian level. Drawing by John C. Sanders*



*Area WA from the northeast with Neo-Babylonian temple below the sand dune. The high wall against the dune is Seleucid. Photo by M. Gibson*

building but almost nothing in the way of objects or pottery to date the structure more precisely. In several of the rooms, we found remnants of painted black vertical stripes. We have not yet reached the sanctuary and the plan of the building seems to indicate that it is a very large structure with several units. We may have exposed only an eighth of the temple. Our next season's work will involve cutting to the south, where we expect to find the main entrance, and to the southwest, where the sanctuary should be.

A meter lower than the Neo-Babylonian temple, there is a Kassite temple with a very different plan. This temple, dating to about 1300 B.C., has longer, larger rooms, laid out in a more complex fashion than the simple grid of the Neo-Babylonian version. We have not yet found the sanctuary in this building either, nor have we found many objects. We do have a very fine, unusual seal impression of Kassite type. The triangular indentations on the borders were made by the metal caps that were attached to the stone cylinder seal which was rolled over this ancient piece of clay. The animals may be foxes.



*Plan of temple in WA, Kassite level. Drawing by John C. Sanders*

Against the outside of the Kassite building, a new façade was built. This façade and a platform of mud bricks laid inside the rooms of the Kassite temple were part of a restoration that we call Post-Kassite because we are unable to date it more precisely. The restoration was never completed and the temple lay in ruins until Neo-Babylonian times.

Below the Kassite temple is another earlier level of irregular pits and ash layers containing Kassite pottery and Kassite school tablets. This trash level lies over a badly constructed building that seems to be Old Babylonian in date. Beneath this building is yet another version of a temple datable to the Isin-Larsa Period (*ca.* 2000-1800 B.C. ). So far, we have been able to investigate only parts of four rooms and a



*Seal impression on a piece of unbaked clay found in a doorway of the Kassite temple in WA. The impression shows foxes and the head of a deer with stars above. The pattern at the top and bottom of the impression was caused by the metal cap at each end of the cylinder seal. Photo by John C. Sanders*

baked-brick-paved courtyard of this phase, but we have evidence of as many as sixteen floors and two destruction levels. The destructions were marked by signs of burning with much charcoal and ash. In the debris, there were dozens of beads of gold, silver, semi-precious stone, and shell, almost a dozen cylinder seals, a fragment of a stone statue head, and bronze objects including several crescents and a dagger. Most importantly, from one of the upper floors within the building, we have a cuneiform tablet fragment, apparently of Larsa date, and from the lowest floor, a fragment of a stone bowl with an inscription



*Akkadian seal found in buried debris, Isin-Larsa level of WA temple. Photo by John C. Sanders*

dedicating the object to the goddess Nin-Shubur for the life of Ibbi-Sin, the last king of the Ur III dynasty. These two inscribed objects bracket our level in time. The great number of whole bowls and other pottery objects also help to make the date precise. It is still not certain whose temple we are excavating because the inscribed bowl is dedicated to Nin-Shubur, whereas a stone axe found here in the previous season was dedicated to another deity whose name begins with Nin but cannot end with Shubur. The many crescents found in the various levels of the temple may indicate that we are in the temple of the Moon God, Nanna/Sin.

In the coming season, we will attempt to expose more of the Isin-Larsa temple while also clearing the late debris from other parts of the Neo-Babylonian temple above.

Area WB provided some surprises this season. In expanding our operations to the east and west, we found that trenches and tunnels from the past century had not destroyed the levels above the Old Babylonian buildings as completely as was thought. In the top strata of debris some bits of wall were found but could not be precisely dated. Under one of these was a burial in a large pottery jar. Around the jar, in the burial cut, were whole and fragmentary remains of 139 letters and a few school and literary texts. These tablets seem on initial inspection to be best dated to about 700 B.C. (or slightly earlier) and to be the archive of an official. The tablets deal with local administration as well as trade and other matters involving Elam, in Iran. The script is a type somewhat different from other cuneiform of the early first millennium B.C. , and the language also has some peculiarities. The discovery of a group of tablets of this size would be a major find in any season. The fact that these come from a time not well represented by texts in southern Mesopotamia and add to the knowledge of social and economic life as well as language makes them even more valuable.

Below the level of the tablet hoard we were able to find the remains of a large public building of the Kassite Period. As so far exposed, the building seems to have had a plan somewhat like a palace found at the Kassite capital, Dur-Kurigalzu. The level is very badly cut up and eroded, but enough undisturbed bits of floor were found to determine the date of the structure. On the floors and in disturbed debris more than a hundred fragments of administrative tablets have been found. These deal with the taking in or distribution of large quantities of oil, grain, and other commodities. Some of these fragments give dates of



*Excavation of a cache of 139 cuneiform tablets dating to about 700 B.C. found in Area WB. Photo by J. Franke*

the kings Kudur-Enlil and Shagarakti-Shuriash, who ruled in the middle of the thirteenth century B.C.

Below the Kassite building there is a level of fill upon the walls of Old Babylonian buildings. Last season, we called these private houses, but this year we are not so sure about that designation. The buildings are well planned, and one is set on an extraordinarily massive foundation of 2 meters' depth. Last season, we thought these foundations were the walls of Isin-Larsa houses on which the Old Babylonian houses had been set, but our expanded exposure has made it certain that there are no doors in the lower walls and no floors, only deliberate fill. Originally, the building had its main doorway to the north, and there were two courtyards around which were rooms. Some time later, the northern doorway was blocked and a baked-brick house was built against that end. In this rather grand house we found many whole pots and several tablets of Hammurabi and Samsuiluna last season. The older building to the south, now entered through a door in the southeast wall, continued in use during this time. Both buildings were abandoned and sand drifted in and over the utensils left in the courts and rooms. Outside the buildings, to the west, we found more



*View of Area WB showing large house of the Old Babylonian period at the end of the twelfth season's excavation. Photo by J. Franke*

than 4 meters of ash and several bread ovens. These ovens and the resulting ash should be connected with two texts found in the building's last years. These tablets record the distribution to various workmen of about 1800 pounds of bread in two weeks. These buildings may be merely the houses of rich people who are giving rations or wages in bread, but it is more likely that this is some sort of governmental or temple establishment, perhaps a bakery, perhaps a supply office that receives bread on contract and dispenses it for work done. In the coming season, we will expand this area to the south and east and expect to find more of the Kassite palace and some other Old Babylonian buildings. The areas on the other sides are eroded and will not give us more information of these levels but should allow us to find buildings of an even earlier time.

During the season we had one very fortunate surface find. This was a group of 76 silver coins dating to the Early Islamic and Abbasid periods. Our cook, Abbas Ali Dost, found them while walking on the tell near WA. The coins were in a stack, inside a cloth sheath. The latest date on any of the coins is about A.D. 790, the time when



*Hoard of early Islamic coins (seventh to ninth century A.D.) found on surface of mound. Note the cloth sheath still covering the coins. Photo by John C. Sanders*

Nippur ceased to exist as a town. These coins will be published by Michael Bates of the American Numismatic Society in our preliminary report for the twelfth season.

In summary, the accomplishments of our latest season were many. We have reached a level in the temple area (WA) that should produce not only many well stratified objects but much information in the form of potsherds and whole vessels for establishing dating criteria for the entire second millennium B.C. We will compare our material here, in a sacred area, with the objects and sherds from WB, an administrative and/or residential section. We have found several superb cylinder seals and sealings that add to our knowledge of Mesopotamian art. The excellent state of preservation in WB, with many objects on floors as they were left in the eighteenth century B.C., allows us to suggest functions for rooms within the buildings. Our collecting of soil samples allows pollen and other botanical studies, plus analyses of snails and similar small animals found in them. Animal and human bone were collected and are in the process of study. Combining all these avenues of research, we hope to present a more complete picture of ancient Mesopotamian life than has hitherto been possible. A good portion of such research is being done by Judith A. Franke, who was responsible for WB this season. Other

members of the staff were John Sanders, architect and photographer, Paul Zimansky, site supervisor in WA, Raymond Tindel, epigrapher and conservator, and Natalie Firnhaber, cataloguer and coordinator of records. Theresa A. McMahon served as a conservator for a month, and Miguel Civil spent two weeks with us working on texts and assisting with the tablet catalogue. Representatives of the Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities were Riadh al-Qaissy and Abdul Kadir Shakhly. We received more than generous assistance from Dr. Isa Salman, director general of Antiquities. Quite literally we owe the continuation of our work to his interest and sponsorship. We are also grateful to Sayyid Fuad Safar, Dr. Fawzi Rashid, and all the other members of the Directorate staff for their help. We owe a debt of gratitude to a group of members who made special contributions for the season. These persons are Mr. and Mrs. Harvey W. Branigar, Jr., Mr. and Mrs. Gaylord Donnelley, Mrs. G. Corson Ellis, Mr. Daggett Harvey, Mr. and Mrs. John Livingood, Mr. and Mrs. Glen A. Lloyd, Dr. and Mrs. C. Phillip Miller, Mr. and Mrs. Hermon Dunlap Smith, Mr. and Mrs. Solomon Byron Smith, Mr. and Mrs. Theodore D. Tieken, and Mr. and Mrs. Chester D. Tripp.

It should be mentioned that excavating and analysis are pointless without the publication of results. We are trying to meet our responsibilities in this regard by publishing short accounts as well as more detailed reports. The journals *Iraq* (1973) and *Expedition* (1973) carried short summaries of the eleventh season. A more definitive, yet also preliminary, report on that season is now in press and is scheduled to appear as "Oriental Institute Communications," No. 22, late this year. A summary of both the eleventh and twelfth seasons has been submitted to *Sumer* (Baghdad), and an account of the twelfth season is being prepared for *Expedition*. The preliminary report on the latest season, yet another "Oriental Institute Communication," is in preparation and will go to the editor during the summer. We intend to keep to this publishing schedule, producing short accounts followed by more substantial reports within months after each season. Final monographs will be presented in the future as units of work are brought to a close.