

NIPPUR REGIONAL PROJECT: UMM AL-HAFRIYAT

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SINCE 1972, the Nippur Expedition in Iraq has had as one of its goals the investigation of the area around the site, both archeologically and environmentally. During the autumn of 1977, we carried out the first of what we hope will be a number of operations in the region.

The site of Umm al-Hafriyat is in the desert about fifteen miles east of Nippur. Robert McC. Adams, in a survey a few years ago, noticed that this site was being badly damaged by illegal digging. He reported that there were remains of human bones and Akkadian period pottery (ca. 2300 B.C.) strewn about hundreds of holes on one part of the site. The diggers had been looking for graves with Akkadian cylinder seals which they could sell or use for jewelry.

There are many sites around Nippur and a number of them would be suitable for excavation in order to learn more about specific periods, but an Akkadian mound was especially appealing. It is one of the ironies of Mesopotamian archeology that although the Akkadian period was of tremendous cultural, political, and economic importance, being the time of the first true empire, there has been almost no large-scale, well-conducted work on a site of this time. Our notions of the pottery and other material of the period were hazy or distorted. With the spectacular finds at Ebla, in Syria, and claims for an Eblite empire that was supposed to have existed in the same time and territory as the Akkadians, it became even more important to determine exactly what Akkadian material was.

Umm al-Hafriyat (“Mother of Excavations”) is a group of low mounds of different ages that lay along an ancient water course. A careful collection of potsherds from the surface showed that there was a small town here from as early as the

Uruk period (ca. 3500 B.C.) until Seleucid times (ca. 300 B.C.), but the settlement tended to shift rather than build up on one spot to form a large, high mound. Unlike Nippur, where there may be ten or more levels superimposed on one another, at Umm al-Hafriyat each mound has no more than three periods of occupation. Area C, for example, where the illegal digging was done, has Akkadian buildings only a few centimeters below the surface.

The reason for the continuing occupation of this site may be a special quality of the clay. When wet, the clay in this area is unusually plastic and dries out rapidly. The clay seems to account for the presence of much ash and more than one hundred pottery kilns of varying periods scattered over the site. We are dealing with an ancient industrial town.

We carried out two major operations on the site. One was a stratigraphic pit at the highest point, Area A. Here we discovered evidence of more than four meters depth of Isin-Larsa occupation (ca. 2100–1900 B.C.) resting on a thin Ur III level (c. 2200 B.C.) that in turn lay on sterile soil. The finds from this pit, mostly sherds, correlated very well with similarly-dated material found at Nippur in the past two years, thus verifying the basic pottery sequence that we have been establishing since 1972.

The second major operation was the clearing of Akkadian buildings in a 20-meter square in Area C. Although damaged by illegal pits, the buildings were intact enough to give good plans and to allow us to recover unusual amounts of seed, soil, bone, shell, and other samples, plus extraordinarily well-executed artifacts. All the walls in Area C are of plano-convex-shaped mud bricks, usually laid flat, but sometimes in herringbone fashion. There is not a bonded corner in the entire area and the walls were laid on whatever surface was available, without leveling. The somewhat shoddy architecture was hidden beneath thick mud plaster.

Most of the rooms we have opened seem to have been utilitarian and the floors are covered with thick beds of ash from the many ovens found in the rooms. Some of the ovens were for bread-baking but others, such as those in Locus 23, contained bones of animals, birds, and fish. One of the ovens also contained a very important Old Akkadian tablet. It is

broken, and therefore difficult to read, but it is definitely a rare example of an early literary tablet, probably a love lyric. About ten other Old Akkadian tablets found in the rooms are of more usual character, recording deliveries of flour, grain, and other commodities from such places as Adab and Lagash. There are mentions in the tablets of "the temple" but no god's name is given, nor is the town identified.

Cutting into the floors of the rooms are graves, most containing pottery and Akkadian cylinder seals. Some of the graves were definitely made during the life of the buildings. There are similar seals and pottery on the floors. All the seals are of more than routine interest and most are well executed, while some are very unusual. Of particular importance are two stamp seals, which are rare in the Akkadian Period; a seal showing a god in a chariot pulled by a bull meeting two human beings who pour a libation; and a seal with a set of unique features. In this last seal, there is a scene in which a human, on the right, is being presented to the Sun God who sits on the left. A god takes a pestle-shaped object from a



Area C, Akkadian buildings partially excavated; note herringbone pattern in wall in foreground



The unusual Akkadian period seals described in the text

chalice held by a nude man. Below is a dwarf. Another god, crossing his arms in a very unusual manner, leads in the human being who carries an animal on one arm. Behind the human being is a box with an erased inscription that had probably been his name. The seal was in process of being re-cut, as evidenced by the erasure of the inscription and the crescent moon that alter the original design.

Our preliminary conclusion about Area C is that we have uncovered the kitchens belonging to a major temple, which may lie to the northeast. Large, square baked bricks and a fragment of a statue found in this direction help to reinforce the evidence from the tablets of a sacred building nearby. The date of the buildings is within the latter part of the Akkadian period, i.e., 2250 and later.

We hope to return to Umm al-Hafriyat for one more season and would like to expand Area C to expose the temple, governmental buildings, and houses that may lie there. We have already gathered a large body of data on the Akkadian period, and have made drastic changes in conceptions about pottery, figurines, and other objects of the time. Our evidence calls into question the dating of levels at important sites, as well as of sites discovered on survey.

When we return to Umm al-Hafriyat, we also hope to excavate a number of pottery kilns of various periods, in order to determine their construction, and how they worked. We will also do experiments with the clay around the site to find out which pottery was local and which was from elsewhere. Part of the investigation would entail making trenches across the ancient canals that are easily visible on the surface next to Area C. From such trenches we would obtain good clay specimens and information on the nature of the stream beds themselves. Geomorphological analysis can give details on water velocity and other natural or man-made factors, plus some indications of climate, ancient vegetation, and so forth.

Geomorphological work is an integral part of our research. While we were excavating at Umm al-Hafriyat, Stephen Lintner, the geomorphologist, was making sections at various points along newly cut, seven-meter-deep drainage ditches that criss-cross the desert around the site. Here, with a minimum of effort on our part, we have exposures of an-

cient soils that are incomparable. If we had time, we could draw soil profiles dozens of kilometers along some of the drains. In the soil, one can see remnants of ancient dunes and marshes—evidence of environment change over as yet undetermined lengths of time. We know that the Nippur-Umm al-Hafriyat area has undergone drastic shifts in landscape, natural conditions, and human occupation since 1850. There have been changes from swamp to irrigation to desert to swamp to desert and lately back to irrigation. Such marked variation, without major climatic fluctuation, seems closely tied to human action and our appreciation of southern Iraq as a humanly-engineered environment is growing with every season. At the same time, we are becoming increasingly aware of the natural reaction to human activity. We are still collecting information on these natural factors and hope eventually to present a sounder view of man-land relationships in southern Mesopotamia than it has been possible to give heretofore.

Our work in the Nippur region must be delayed for a time. We have been asked to help do salvage in an area northeast of Baghdad where a new reservoir is being built. This work, the Hamrin Salvage Project, has already drawn teams from England, France, Germany, Japan, Austria, the U. S., and other nations. We are forming a joint expedition with the University of Copenhagen and will be in the field in the fall of 1978. We should return to Nippur in 1979.

Archeological field work is successful in great part because of a good staff. The Nippur Expedition has a core of individuals whose loyalty, interest, and good humor make each succeeding season more productive than the last. Of prime importance is John Sanders, the architect, who has been with us since 1972. The rest of the team, most of whom have been involved for two or more seasons, are Richard Zettler, Assistant Director and archeological supervisor; Robert D. Biggs, epigrapher; James Armstrong, archeological supervisor; Stephen Lintner, geomorphologist; John Mooney, registrar and accountant; Patricia Deres, photographer; Peggy Bruce, draftsman; Jill Maher, conservator; Daniel Isaac and Hussayn Ali Hamza, representatives of the State Organization of Antiquities.

We owe special thanks to the representatives and, of

course, to Dr. Moayyad Damirchi, who saw the value of the work at Umm al-Hafriyat. We must also acknowledge, for the last time, the help and encouragement of Sayyid Fuad Safar, who died shortly after our season was completed. Professor Safar, who received a degree from Chicago just before World War II, will be greatly missed by all archeologists working in Iraq.

We also owe a debt of gratitude to the Friends of Nippur, who continue to support our work and receive little more than a newsletter in return. It was possible to meet with a few of them at small gatherings over the past year, including a cocktail party following the Oriental Institute Members' Day. Space restrictions do not permit me to list the Friends of Nippur here, but I wish to emphasize that our work is much enhanced by their support and interest. We are very pleased whenever any of the Friends are able to visit us in Iraq and wish that more were able to do so.