

Nippur

McGuire Gibson

The 17th Season at Nippur, scheduled for the winter of 1986, was postponed when permissions and visas were not issued until late in January. The postponement, although regrettable, may prove to be for the best. We have in mind a specific research project at Nippur and it is better to do it in the fall rather than the winter.

In previous Annual Reports, I have detailed our investigations on the West Mound, especially on the low southern end of the site where we have been able to recover important information on the Ur III city wall (ca. 2100 B.C.), the Kassite occupation (ca. 1250 B.C.), and the time when the city was under the control of the Assyrians (ca. 7th century, B.C.). Last year's report was devoted to a description of our return in the 16th Season to Tablet Hill, one of the eastern mounds, for a concentrated investigation of the stratigraphy there. In that season we gained a tremendous amount of information not only on the time before, during, and after the period of Assyrian control, but also on the second millennium B.C. We were able to gain new proof that at least in the Tablet Hill section of the city (and we think for most or all of the rest of the site) there was an abandonment from some time after 1750 B.C. until some time in the Kassite period (about 1400, we think). Equally important was the finding that after a flourishing under the

Kassites, when Nippur was a cultural and religious center of great importance, the city once more went into a decline for most of the time between about 1100 and 800 B.C.

We still have problems we wish to solve in the period from 1750 to 600 B.C., but we think we have a fairly good idea of the history of the city for that span of time. We now think that it is time to turn to both the very early and the very late levels at the site.

It is our intention, when we return to Nippur for the 17th Season (in the fall of 1986, we hope) to investigate the earliest levels of occupation in a spot just to the north of the ziggurat. We know that there are here remains of the Ur III city wall, and earlier versions of the city's defenses which have been dated to the Akkadian and Early Dynastic periods (as early as 2600 B.C.). There is nearby a very large, low area that has been interpreted as a harbor within the city walls. Carl Haines, the former director of Nippur, thought the basin was created by the Parthians, who built gigantic mudbrick buildings at Nippur at about A.D. 100. It was Haines' idea that the Parthians, in looking for material to make mudbricks, did as many ancient people did—they dug up an unoccupied part of the site. If in digging for brick-making they also created a basin, which could be filled with water that would make a defensive barrier and a resource in case of siege, all the better. We know

from some of Haines' exploratory pits and from one we made in 1972 that there are Uruk period (ca. 3500 B.C.) levels near the edge of the basin. There were also sherds from earlier, prehistoric periods, going back as far as a phase we call the Hajji Muhammad (ca. 5,000 B.C.).

Giving weight to the idea that the Parthians dug the basin to make mudbricks is the fact that in all the Parthian buildings that lie near the top of Nippur's mounds, the mudbricks are full of sherds. These sherds are of various periods, including the earliest at the site. We see no location on the mound, other than the basin north of the ziggurat, where extensive ancient digging took place. Therefore we think the Parthians did in fact create it and we also think that the edges of the

basin will provide us with a sequence of the earliest levels at Nippur.

In thinking of digging to the early levels, we must prepare to deal with a high water table. Increased irrigation around Nippur, supplied by development projects that have transformed southern Iraq in the past fifteen years, has resulted in a much higher groundwater level than at any time since Chicago began to dig at Nippur (1948). In the early 1970s, before the completion of reservoirs and irrigation schemes, we could excavate to at least four meters below the present plain before we encountered water. In some years, when there had been little rain, we could reach six meters below the plain.

The Ekur ziggurat at Nippur showing the area to the north (at left) where new trench is planned to investigate early levels.



Beginning in the late 1970s, we found that the water in the winter months could be as high as a meter below the plain. Thus, if we wish to reach early occupations, we must work in the early fall, in September and October, when the water table is still low because of the evaporation caused by the heat of summer. In order to reach the very earliest levels, some ten meters or so below the plain, not only would we have to work in early fall but we would also be obliged to use pumps.

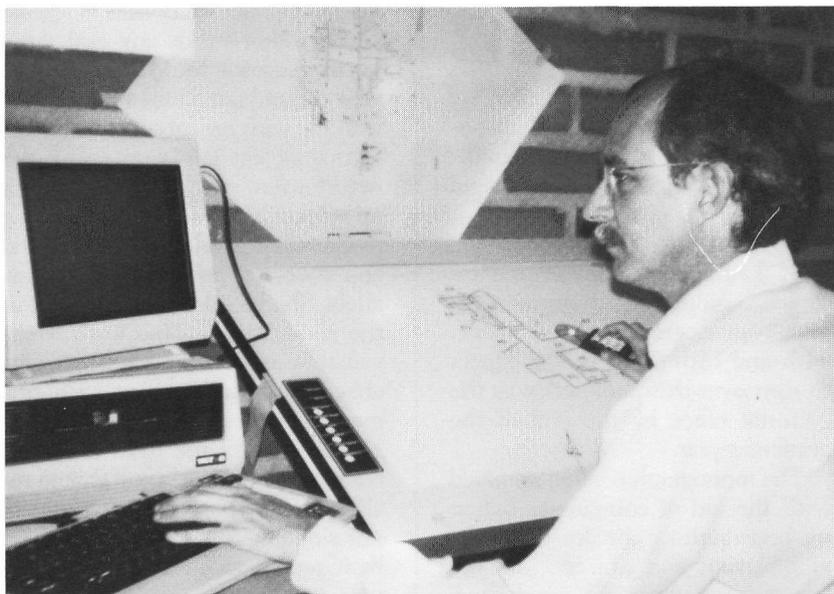
We are envisioning a multi-season operation in these investigations of the early levels. In the forthcoming season, we will open a fairly large area but not attempt to go below the water table. In future years, when logistical problems are less pressing than at the present time, we will operate with pumps and try to reach virgin soil. In doing this work, we will be redefining the pottery sequence and verifying or correcting the findings of earlier excavators. We will also be gaining a better idea of activities in the area immediately adjacent to the most important shrine in Mesopotamia, the ziggurat complex of Enlil.

We have already begun to investigate the latest levels at Nippur. We put in a tiny trench on the top of the West Mound (Area WE) in the 16th Season. This area was laid out as an alternate site for work whenever the sand might be blowing too hard to continue digging at Tablet Hill. As it happened, we were forced off Tablet Hill only once that season and, thus, we worked only one day on the Islamic remains in WE. We expect to open a large area

nearby in forthcoming seasons. This will be the first systematic, controlled excavation of the Islamic and the underlying Sasanian levels that has been undertaken at Nippur. Earlier excavators cut through these levels rather fast on their way to the older strata.

It is important to excavate the late levels for a number of reasons, the most fundamental being that nowhere in Iraq, and almost nowhere in the entire Middle East, has there been a controlled excavation that could show in artifacts the transition from the Sasanian period (A.D. 224 to 642) to the Islamic. The main mounds at Nippur have no occupation later than about A.D. 800, during the Abbasid Caliphate, but there are small mounds a hundred meters west of the city that date from about A.D. 900 to 1200. Last season, because the belt of sand dunes east of the city had moved appreciably, we discovered that just outside the city wall to the northeast of the ziggurat there was a very interesting low mound datable to the 14th century, after the Mongol conquest. This last occupation and the canal that fed the settlement are especially important since in surveys around Nippur, no sites of this period were recorded in the vicinity. We can, by excavating in the Islamic layers on the main mounds and on the subsidiary mounds, help to lay out a detailed, controlled sequence for the Islamic era.

If we can succeed, in the next few seasons, in excavating to virgin soil while also investigating the Sasanian and Islamic remains, we will have established a sound sequence for all periods of occupation at Nippur from 5000 B.C. to A.D.



John C. Sanders working with a plotter on plans from Nippur.

1400. In conjunction with the corrected sequences derived from earlier modern operations at Tablet Hill and the Inanna Temple, the artifact typology we have established would constitute the most complete sequence in all of Mesopotamia, even with the periods of abandonment or near abandonment in the 2nd and early 1st millennia, B.C.

During the past winter, when we stayed in Chicago instead of going to Nippur, we continued to work on the analysis of materials and the writing up of results. Richard L. Zettler and James A. Armstrong, who have been concentrating on different portions of the pottery sequence, have come to very important new conclusions on the development of types. They are both at a point where they may

have a hunch that some specific object was given an incorrect dating in previous publications and, by searching through the original dig records, they can often find notes that prove the hunch to be true. Things that once appeared to be unrelated are falling into place. Armstrong, who is dealing with the material around the time of the Assyrian domination (ca. 7th century, B.C.), is able to make corrections in plans from earlier excavations, including some we did ten years ago, and to reassign pottery types to later dates than previously thought. The magnitude of these changes can be indicated by a discussion of one kind of cup. When we began the current program of excavations in 1972, the published pottery sequence was so inadequate that we depended on only three or four types of pottery, including this

cup, as critical markers for the Kassite period (ca. 1600–1157 B.C.). We can now show, from a reanalysis of our own finds and those of other excavators, that this cup did not appear at Nippur or any other southern Iraqi site until some time around 800 B.C.

These new analyses and revisions are to appear in a monograph on the 13th, 14th and 15th Seasons. We expect to turn over this manuscript to the editorial office by the end of the academic year.

The monograph is being prepared with the aid of computers. Before we begin writing the description of architecture and objects, we first have the computer list out the loci and walls, telling us which loci were contemporary and which walls were found under or above others, giving us the basic sequence of events. We then call up a list of all the objects found in all the loci in a level. Then, we prepare the catalogue of objects, deciding whether a given item should be illustrated with a photo or a drawing or both. As we write up the descriptive section on buildings, we include a discussion of the objects found in specific rooms. Various categories of objects are being compared statistically, attempting to find patterns in the relative frequencies of various types. Eventually, we expect to turn over to the editor not just a manuscript, but a set of computer disks that will be edited and then sent for automatic typesetting to produce the book.

The key role in a publication is still the human being, regardless of the use of computers. The machines cannot create the report, assess sig-

nificance of one set of facts as against another, nor make any real decisions. Augusta McMahon, an advanced graduate student, has been working with me for several months sorting object cards, assessing the need for new photographs, marking up negatives to be printed, doing preliminary catalogues of objects, and checking publications for parallels. She has also begun to lay out the illustrations. This work is invaluable experience for a field archaeologist. In working with primary field records, one gains an appreciation of the need for good, consistent field notes and should realize, better than others who have not worked on the preparation of a basic report, that taking care of details in the field avoids problems when it is no longer possible to re-measure an object or check with a supervisor on exactly what was meant by a description of some architectural feature.

Miguel Civil and Robert D. Biggs are preparing all tablets from the 13th, 14th and 15th Seasons for publication in the volume.

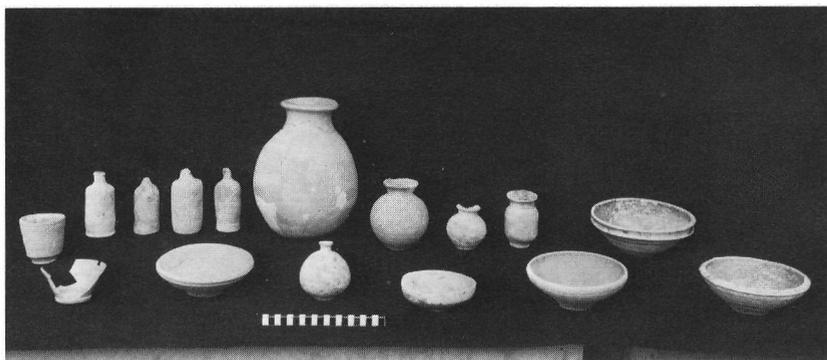
Judith A. Franke, who is now Associate Director of the Dickson Mounds Museum in Lewistown, Illinois, has recently completed writing her doctoral dissertation on the Old Babylonian houses (ca. 1750 B.C.) at Area WB. This work, an intricate study of all objects in the buildings, will probably be published as a separate monograph. In addition to her professional duties and the writing of the dissertation, Judi has also been analyzing and writing a report on the post-Old Babylonian material in WB, which will be included in the general monograph, mentioned above.

John and Peggy Sanders continue to expand our use of computer mapping, drafting, and record keeping, which should help to avoid problems of forgotten details. All our current plans and sections are being computer-generated and we hope to succeed in introducing the entire system to Iraq as soon as it is feasible. For now, John and Peggy, in their roles as the partners in Archaeological Graphics, Inc., a small business in Tucson, Arizona, are working not only for us but also, on contract, for the Arizona State Museum and the Arizona expedition to Kourion in Cyprus. John tells me that the system, created for Nippur over the past few years, is working beautifully on this site where an earthquake buried a town in mid-stride. The Kourion expedition has had quite a lot of media attention lately; all the mentions of computer mapping and laser theodolites are about John and Peggy.

In analyzing the archaeological finds in relation to the architecture, we archaeologists have found the reports on animal bones, by Prof. Joachim Boessneck of the University of Munich, to be especially enlightening. One of our aims is to determine what functions may have been performed in specific rooms and whether or not there may be indications of class or other social distinctions. Many archaeologists have attempted to make such determinations on the basis of sherds and whole pots found in context. We are finding that potsherds tend to be scattered fairly uniformly throughout a house. Only rarely does a pattern emerge that allows a hypothetical assignment of function beyond the evidence from architec-

ture or traffic pattern in a building. Toilets and bathrooms are hard to miss, as are courtyards and kitchens. Other rooms are more difficult. But we are finding that animal bones tend to be distributed in interesting patterns that sometimes give a clue to room use or the status of the occupants, especially when viewed along with other kinds of information. For instance, in the Ur III city wall investigation, we found that there was a greater variety of animal bones inside houses where we also found administrative tablets than in the neighboring spaces. The variety of bones inside the houses included the usual assortment of sheep and goat, cow, and pig, but also ducks and other birds, fish, and turtle shell. Bones found outside the houses tended to be dominated by pig bones, with sheep and goat in somewhat lesser quantities. We know that much more pig was eaten in the Ur III period and earlier times than in later periods. But, the predominance of pig outside the houses compared to its more normal distribution inside them would seem to indicate that the elite in the early periods ate much less pig than the common folk, and had a greater variety in their diet.

Environmental analyses on soil samples are still being completed by Stephen Lintner, with the increasingly important help of Margaret Brandt. Lintner, because of his own job commitments, has been able to take part in field work only intermittently. He has turned over his samples to Ms. Brandt, who is analyzing them as part of her dissertation on the ancient environment and its relation



Important types of pottery from the 1st millennium, B.C., including the cup-type with a stump base (upside-down at left) that had previously been attributed to the wrong period.

to irrigation, as well as for present and future monographs. We have entered into a cooperative, large-scale project with the Belgian and Swiss expeditions to Iraq to attempt to reconstruct ancient Mesopotamian ecology. We will be sharing the services of natural scientists in the field and in laboratories both in the U.S. and Europe. Already, some of our soil samples have been analyzed in Ghent and our analyses of similar samples will be shared with the Belgian specialists. Ms. Brandt will be travelling to Belgium on a periodic basis to work with the technicians there. Archaeologists and cuneiformists will work closely with the scientists to create research strategies and to bring evidence from their disciplines to bear on the question of ancient environment and human response to it. Occasional conferences and work sessions will take place as results make them necessary. We are, thus, expanding well beyond our own research in ancient Mesopotamian ecology, begun when we took a geomorphologist to Nippur in 1972 and initiated the systematic collection of seeds, soil, bones and other samples. The collection of such samples, although

routine in prehistoric excavations, was at that time rare or non-existent in Near Eastern historical sites.

We have been sustained here at home by the faithfulness of Friends of Nippur, who once again anticipated a field season that did not take place. Even with this disappointment, the Friends organized in the spring a very successful benefit dinner and auction in the home of Raja and Mary Jo Khuri. I must give special thanks to the Khuris, to Mr. and Mrs. Roger Hilpp, to James Mesple, to Joan and Homer Rosenberg, and to all those who donated items or helped in other ways to make the night a success. I am, as always, grateful to all those Friends who, though located far from Chicago, continue to support our work even when we are not in the field and I have little or nothing to write newsletters about.

During the year, Nippur was featured along with several other important Babylonian sites, in a special edition of *Dossiers Histoire et Archéologie* (No. 103, March 1986 [Dijon, France]) and the statue of Ur-Nammu, found at Nippur in the 1950s, was on the cover.