

▼ ▼ ▼

Nippur

McGuire Gibson

T

he Oriental Institute's 17th Season of excavation at Nippur took place during the autumn of 1987. The Expedition arrived in Iraq in late

September and excavated from October 10 until December 12. ▼ The primary aim of the 17th Season was to investigate a low mound five hundred meters northeast of the ziggurat, outside the city wall; the movement of sand dunes in 1985 had exposed architectural traces and a rich surface scatter of sherds there. The coins collected from the surface were datable to the 14th century A.D., the Ilkhanid period following the Mongol conquest. There has been almost no controlled excavation of sites of the 14th century and any results we achieved would be important. ▼ Since we were going to be working to the northeast of the city, we also decided to put in a trench at the city wall in this area to verify the account given by the University of Pennsylvania expedition in the 1890's and to compare the findings there with our own from the city wall at the southern end of the city, Area WC. The Pennsylvania excavators had indicated that there were Early Dynastic (c. 2600 B.C.) and Akkadian (c. 2300 B.C.) versions of the city wall directly under the Ur III (c. 2200 B.C.) one here. We have wanted for some time to view material from these periods in one stratigraphic sequence and we believed that a trench at the city wall should achieve this result. ▼ While the architect John Sanders was laying out a grid over the Islamic mound (Area M), Margaret Brandt and Augusta McMahon carried out a random sampling of the surface debris. This collection of artifacts from more than twenty locations on the mound gave us information on different activity areas within the site. For instance, iron and copper were worked on the northern end of the site. On the southern end, the Islamic settlement rested in part on a low Seleucid (c. 200 B.C.) mound. In the middle of the site, which was no more than fifty centimeters higher than the surrounding plain, we laid out a set of squares over the remains of mudbrick walls visible on the surface. About twenty meters to the south was the bed of the canal that fed the site. We have, so far, traced this canal upstream about half a kilometer northwest of Nippur. It comes down to the city, runs just inside the city wall, and turns out through the wall toward Area M. Beyond Area M, it turns southeast

for another kilometer until it is hidden under sand dunes. This canal had never been noticed before, because it is now a very shallow trough in the earth and does not become easily apparent until after a rain, when the bed retains water longer than the surround-

**The Oriental
Institute
1987-1988
Annual Report**

ing ground. It is clear now that it was the cutting of this canal which caused the gap in the city wall that previous excavators have explained as the work of the Parthians (c. A.D. 150).

James A. Armstrong was responsible for excavations on the Islamic mound, and with his usual meticulousness, he began to articulate the mudbricks of the walls and to define floors. Within two days it became obvious that the cultural remains we could map or gather on the surface were the best record we would ever have of the settlement. Wind erosion has removed all but the lowest course of mudbricks from the buildings, and the beaten earth floors were intact only against the walls. Armstrong continued working for about a week and was able to prove that the plain,

hand-formed, crude pottery on the site was contemporary with the very well-made, blue-black-and-white-glazed specimens, since both kinds of pottery were found on the remnants of floors in buildings. This finding is important because crude wares very similar in shape and decoration to those from Area M can also be found on sites as late as the end of the 19th century, for instance around the ruins of shaykhs' forts.

Having decided that further excavation in Area M was not necessary, we concentrated all attention on Area EA, the stratigraphic trench at the city wall near the ziggurat. This trench was positioned at the end of a high ridge at the southeast edge of the gap in the city wall. Pennsylvania's work here in the 1890's had revealed that the ridge consisted of a massive wall of the



*The 17th Season expedition photo,
with the newly acquired Maytag washer.*





A group of bowls found alongside walls of Ur III houses in area WC-3 (c. 2100 B.C.). The bowls, found in pairs as pictured, sometimes contained animal bones. These are thought to be deposits made to ward off evil.

Parthian period (c. A.D. 150), sitting on a wall of "small bricks." We assumed that the small bricks were part of the Ur III (c. 2100-2000 B.C.) city wall, and that below we would be Akkadian and Early Dynastic versions.

We had intended to expose and articulate only the bottom few courses of Parthian mudbricks in Area EA but found that this construction went much lower than anticipated. In order to make a firm foundation for their defenses around the ziggurat, the Parthians cut far down into earlier levels in some places. We would reconstruct a total height of more than fifteen meters (about 50 feet) of Parthian mudbrick wall and foundation in Area EA.

Under the Parthian walls we found constructions of small bricks. They were not rectangular as Ur III bricks would be, but plano-convex, a brick shape that is more typical of Early Dynastic and Akkadian construction. The pottery very soon made it clear that the walls we were beginning to define under the Parthian were Early Dynastic. The Parthians had cut away all of the Ur III and Akkadian brickwork that might have existed here. Pennsylvania's trench had then cut away the top part of the remaining Early Dynastic walls in two giant steps, so we had only to remove the sand and back-fill from that old operation to reach even older levels. While defining intact Early Dynastic brickwork, we came upon the remains of a baked brick drain that Pennsylvania had already exposed and published. The drain had been cut down into a narrow alley of the Early Dynastic period, so not much of the Early Dynastic buildings were harmed by it. When Steve Cole took the drain apart, he found that several of the bricks had a stamped in-

scription of the Akkadian king Sharrasharri (c. 2217-2193 B.C.). These bricks may date the drain to the reign of this king, who did considerable reconstruction in the ziggurat complex. But, without better stratigraphic information, we cannot be certain that this it was not built in Ur III times reusing Akkadian bricks.

In the upper Early Dynastic levels we exposed part of a very large building with walls as thick as three meters. We found intact only the southeastern outer wall and doorway, part of a courtyard, and part of one room. The building continues beyond the area of our excavation to the southwest and northeast, but the entire northwestern end had been removed by Pennsylvania. There were two plastered floors inside the building, both fairly irregular. On each of the floors was a layer of deliberate fill, composed of dirt, ashes, and sherds. Associated with the upper floor was an impressive stairway leading up through the doorway to the alley on the southeast. This stairway had been coated with bitumen to protect it. We found very few objects in this building but assume that it must have been part of the city wall fortifications or a subsidiary building next to the city wall.

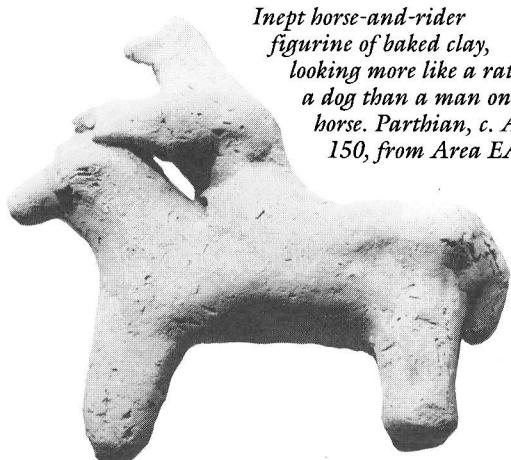
In the lower step of the trench, to the northwest, we found remains of an earlier building in the sides of the trench. We then cut a test pit, 1 x 5 meters in size, in the bottom of the trench, to see if the area might produce sufficient information to

justify continuing the operation. In the pit, which went down more than three meters, we recovered no more architecture, only layers of almost pure clay, alternating with beds of deliberate fill made up of ashes and sherds. We encountered ground water about three meters below plain level, just as we were finding exclusively sherds of Early Dynastic I pottery types. We had begun to hope that we could go below the Early Dynastic into Uruk and Ubaid levels, and maybe to virgin soil, but the water made that impossible.

An investigation into the earliest levels at Nippur would be very rewarding. Pennsylvania reached virgin soil under the ziggurat, but we know little of their findings. Chicago's work since 1948 has not penetrated below the Uruk period (c. 3500 B.C.). We find sherds and other items of Ubaid and Uruk date on many parts of the site and can judge



*Inexp horse-and-rider
figurine of baked clay,
looking more like a rat on
a dog than a man on a
horse. Parthian, c. A.D.
150, from Area EA.*



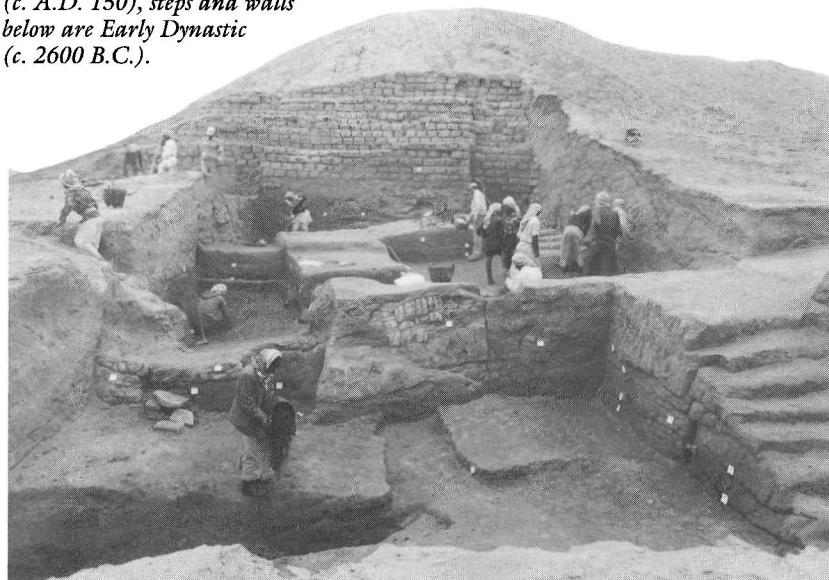
that the Hajji Muhammad phase of the Ubaid (c. 5000 B.C.) was probably the earliest occupation of Nippur. But we have known for some time that this scatter of early material is the result of Parthian building, not a reflection of the actual size of the most ancient settlement. Whenever we break apart Parthian mudbricks, we find pottery of almost any previous period, including Ubaid and Uruk. We also find baked clay and stone cones, which must originally have been associated with public buildings of the Uruk period. It has been suggested by several excavators at Nippur that the large, low basin enclosed by the city wall to the north of the ziggurat was created by the Parthians when they used this part of

the site as a quarry for material to make their mudbricks, destroying layers of early buildings as they excavated. This suggestion is very sensible and we hoped that our EA trench, located on the edge of that basin, might encounter the remains of some public building of the Uruk period over Ubaid strata. We now know, however, that to reach these levels, we would need to create an elaborate pumping system, which is not possible under present conditions.

Not having found Ur III and Akkadian remains under the Parthian in Area EA, Augusta McMahon put in exploratory trenches on either side of the ridge (Areas EB and EC). Area EB was located on the outer side of the city wall, at a place where Pennsylvania indicated that it had found Parthian mudbricks above smaller ones. At this



Area EA, on the city wall northeast of the ziggurat. Large bricks are Parthian (c. A.D. 150), steps and walls below are Early Dynastic (c. 2600 B.C.).





place, the large mudbricks were easily visible above smaller, rectangular bricks. Upon cleaning and defining these bricks and excavating below the smaller bricks, McMahon was able to recover a few sherds of probable Akkadian and Ur III date. We are fairly certain that the small bricks here are Ur III. She also cleaned debris from a stretch of Pennsylvania's exposures, and we were able to plan the details of Parthian construction already noted by the old expedition. Further work in EB would have entailed the removal of a mass of Parthian brickwork, which we were not prepared to carry out. McMahon therefore transferred her team to the southwest side of the ridge where a burned wall of small mudbricks had been left by Pennsylvania. This operation also met Parthian interference. These late builders had left a tiny area of Early Dynastic floors and walls bordered on all sides by deep trenches that were then filled with Parthian foundations. There was no Akkadian or Ur III here either. McMahon did notice a nearby ridge made up in large part of ashes, pottery-making slag, twisted sherds, and fragments of pottery kilns. This ridge might be the focus of a systematic investigation in future. From surface indications, this pottery-making area was in use in several periods, the last being the Early Islamic.

In mid-November, having reached water in Area EA, having recorded more than six meters' depth of Early Dynastic activity, and having been blocked from the Akkadian and Ur

III in EB and EC, we had to decide whether or not it would be fruitful to expand our work here. We already had a stratified sample of pottery from Early Dynastic I to III, which would allow interesting comparisons with the Inanna Temple sequence established in the early 1960's. We judged that the scale of architecture in EA was so enormous that it would require a much larger effort than we could afford in the three weeks remaining of the season. But we knew that in that time we could make great strides in answering a set of questions about Area WC, on the southern end of the site. We decided, therefore, to shut down EA and return to the city wall and houses at WC.

During the 13th and 14th Seasons (1975-76), the Nippur Expedition spent a great deal of time working on the city wall in Area WC. At that time, the evidence seemed to show that the fortifications were built in three phases. The earliest version of the city wall appeared to be very regularly planned, with small rectangular rooms running along its length. In the second phase, casemate foundations were built up against the first phase wall. Later, in the third phase, a superstructure was laid over the foundations and the earliest phase. We could date the first phase within or after the reign of Ur-Nammu, the first king of the Ur III dynasty (2112-2095



B.C.) by means of a seal impression mentioning him. The second phase could be dated to some time after the 44th year of Ur-Nammu's son Shulgi (2094–2047 B.C.) from a dated tablet found at this level. The phase-three superstructure was also built within the Ur III period, probably in the reign of the last king Ibbi-Sin who claimed to have built the wall of Nippur in his 6th year (c. 2023 B.C.).

As we have worked to publish the final report on our work in WC, we have become increasingly uneasy with this reconstruction of events, because the first-phase “city wall” stopped and turned a corner towards the northeast when it should have continued to run northwest. In previous seasons, we were unable to remove the upper strata and follow the wall to see if it turned back to the northwest, making this deviation only the edge of a buttress. Until we could examine the

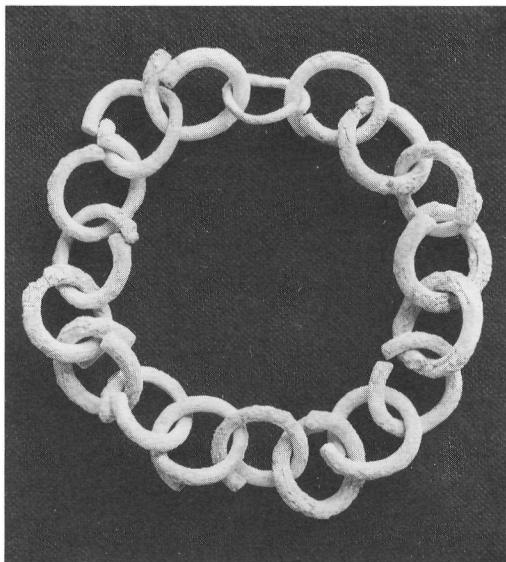
corner in detail, we had to face the possibility that the first phase was not a city wall at all, but only a large building.

We also had problems with the later history of the southern corner. We had found remains of a five-meter-wide city wall in the debris above the Ur III versions. Although in one place it seemed to be Kassite (c. 1250 B.C.), in another place, with better preserved stratigraphy, it was clearly built at the same time as late 7th century B.C. houses.

To resolve all difficulties, we laid out a long trench that was two meters wide on the outside of the city wall and three to four meters inside. We removed all late debris and the remnant of the superstructure (third phase) of the Ur III city wall, then exposed the earliest Ur III building, cutting to virgin soil in three places in



A bracelet made of lead, from the Ur III houses in Area WC-3 (c. 2100 B.C.).





Islamic pottery bowl fragment, in blue and black over white, glazed, from Area M, 14th century A.D.



the trench. This operation was an unqualified success.

Virgin soil consisted of greenish-yellow sand — real sand, not the clay and sand mixture called aparna that we see in the dunes at Nippur today. On the sand were layers of black, ashy debris from cooking fires, containing a few Ur III sherds. We can say with confidence that the southern corner of the site was not occupied before this period. Then, mudbrick houses were built. In these buildings in previous seasons we had found tablets, including administrative records regarding food preparation and distribution. A short time after the houses were occupied, the “first-phase city wall” was built, but we can now say for certain that this was not a city wall, but rather a very large, impressive, public building. We cannot yet determine its function since we have seen only some

portions of three of its walls. To build this large structure, one of the houses was partially demolished; then, its walls were rebuilt and run directly against the larger building. We assume that this house and the new building

were functionally linked, otherwise the house would not have been allowed to touch the new building. Large ovens and smaller bread ovens in and between the houses continued in use while the large building was in existence, so all buildings in the area may have served in provisioning the city. Later, the large building was leveled, and the foundations of the city wall were built against it (our old “second phase”). Finally, the city wall superstructure was laid over everything. This superstructure and its foundations constitute the only city wall construction in the southern end of the site. We continue to think that the wall was the work of Ibbi-Sin (2028-2004 B.C.), the last king of the dynasty. Some new information argues for this dating of the wall. Under a



part of the superstructure we found a partially destroyed baked-brick chamber. The bricks of the chamber included two with a stamp of Amar-Suen (2046-38 B.C.). Since part of the foundation for the superstructure was laid inside this chamber, we can say that the foundations must date after the beginning of the reign of Amar-Suen. Ibbi-sin began ruling just ten years after Amar-Suen.

After the Ur III period, this part of the site was abandoned as a living area and the city wall decayed into a ridge. Some burials and other activities took place here in the Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian periods (c. 2100-1600 B.C.), but this was not an area of housing. In the 13th century, Nippur was revived by the Kassites and once again dwellings were built in Area WC. We now know that at this time a five- or six-meter-wide city wall was built above the Ur III fortifications. At the same time, a moat was cut, ten meters wide and three meters deep. We had found the inner edge of the moat in earlier seasons, but had been unable to reach its lowest part because of groundwater, so we were obliged to date it by the latest pottery found in it, i.e. 7th century. We were able to reach the lowest levels in the current season and found beds of water-laid clay which were deposited when the moat was in use. The potsherds in these clay layers are no later than Kassite, so we can

correctly redate the moat to that period. After the Kassite period, Area WC was again deserted, and the moat filled up with wind-blown sand and clayey sediments that rain water brought down from the mound. In the 7th century, B.C., when Nippur experienced another expansion, the area was again used for housing. Another five-meter-wide city wall was built above the Ur III and Kassite versions, and the outer part of the old moat was re-excavated, although not filled with water, to make a defensive ditch. At the inside edge of the ditch a two stepped-defensive wall was built, meaning that an enemy had to get down into and over the ditch, then over the two-stepped wall before facing about fifteen meters of upsloping ground that lay in front of the actual city wall.

Besides working on the long trench at the city wall, we also re-examined the 7th century houses in the area. James Armstrong is finishing his doctoral dissertation on material from these buildings and he needed to resolve some stratigraphic problems. He worked for about a week with a small team and then joined the rest of the staff in the long trench.

As in previous seasons, Margaret Brandt carried out geomorphological and environmental observations around the site.

The staff for the 17th Season consisted of myself as director, Sayyid Muhammad Yahya as government representative, James A. Armstrong as assistant director and archaeologist, John C. Sanders as architect, Peggy Bruce Sanders as artist and photographer, Margaret Brandt as geomorpholo-

gist, Stephen Cole as epigrapher, Augusta McMahon as archaeologist and registrar. For ten days Abraham Van As and Loe Jacobs of the Belgian Expedition to Tell ed-Deir joined us to study the Nippur pottery. The Nippur Expedition and the Belgian Expedition are cooperating on a set of projects, predominantly geomorphological and ceramic.

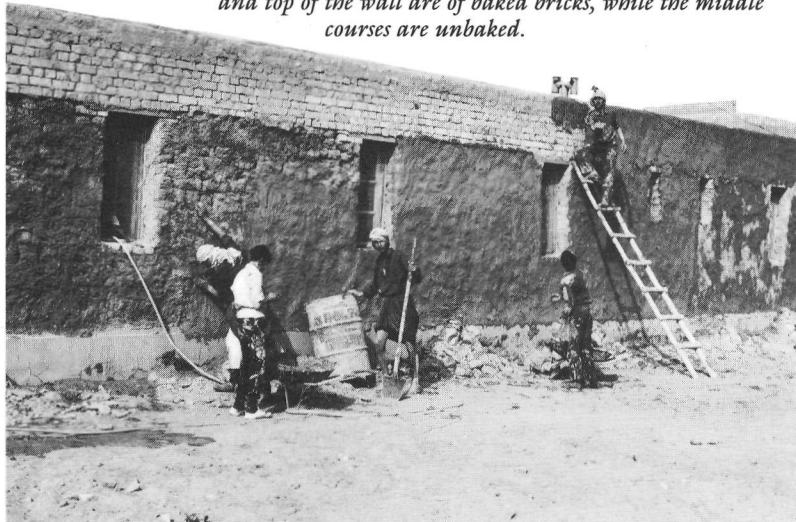
We were very fortunate this season to have the services of Sayyid Khalaf Bedawi, who had been foreman at Nippur in the 1940s and 1950s. Thereafter he served for years as an official with the Directorate General of Antiquities. He has now retired from government service and is available once again for Nippur. Our work gained greatly from his presence.

The 17th Season will be remembered by the staff as the year we obtained a washing machine. The Belgian Expedition sold us a Maytag, which it had bought from a sale of U.S. Embassy goods in 1972. The machine, made in 1967, worked well for the Belgians and is now back in American hands, still performing beautifully, making our dig life a little cleaner.

As in all seasons, we owe a great debt of thanks to Dr. Moayyad Sa'id Damirchi, the Director of Antiquities, and his staff for their help and encouragement in our work. We must especially mention Dr. Bahija Ismail, Director of the Iraq Museum, for her kindness in allowing samples to be exported for analysis. We were also aided in a number of ways by Ambassador and Mrs. David Newton, Mr. and



Replastering the Nippur expedition house with mud. The old plaster, from twenty years ago, had first been removed. The bottom and top of the wall are of baked bricks, while the middle courses are unbaked.





Mrs. Jack McCreary, and other members of the U. S. Embassy staff.

Here in Chicago, the year was an unusually eventful one. A special exhibition on Nippur was mounted in the Museum, opening with a dinner and a special program on May 16. A hundred years ago, the University of Pennsylvania sent out the first American expedition ever to work in Mesopotamia. In choosing Nippur, that expedition also became the first American team to excavate an ancient Near Eastern site rather than a Classical one. Although the expedition took place a few years before the birth of the University of Chicago, there was a Chicago connection. On the first expedition was a young Assyriologist, Robert Francis Harper, who wrote letters back to his brother, the eminent orientalist William Rainey Harper, then on the faculty at Yale. In the letters, the Harpers discussed the offer that had been made to W. R. Harper to become the University of Chicago's first president. Shortly after he took up the post, President Harper arranged for his brother, Robert Francis, to come to the University of Chicago as its first Assyriologist. This appointment, along with that of an Egyptologist and a Hebrew specialist, formed the department which grew into the Oriental Institute.

In 1988, we also celebrate the 40th anniversary of Chicago's commitment to Nippur, which began as a joint

expedition with Pennsylvania. The thousands of cuneiform documents found at Nippur by the old Pennsylvania expedition had acted as a vital stimulus for Akkadian and Sumerian studies, and it was thought that a return to the site would add substantially to the body of texts. The Joint Expedition also intended to apply modern techniques of excavation to the site in order to put the older finds in better context. After Pennsylvania's departure from the expedition in 1952, the American Schools of Oriental Research became the partner until 1962. Since then, Chicago has continued alone. Our current program of research is a continuation of the commitment made in 1948, adding aspects of environmental and anthropological research to the problems and unique opportunities provided by the site.

At the end of the 17th Season, we returned to Chicago and were almost immediately involved in preparations for the exhibition. John and Peggy Sanders prepared the graphic illustrations on computer and thus we were able to mount numerous five-color plans. Augusta McMahon researched the exhibit, working through old publications and unpublished notes from Pennsylvania's days and from the early Chicago years. She also edited and proofread my label copy and helped pick out objects for a special case on "securing a house" in ancient Mesopotamia, using items from Nippur.

Since so many of the objects on permanent exhibition in the Meso-

potamian Hall came from Nippur, we devised a guide to highlight these objects and to indicate how excavation at Nippur and subsequent work on finds have contributed to our understanding of Mesopotamian civilization in general. Once again, Augusta McMahon did the basic research on the items in the cases and edited my text. She also drew and reproduced illustrations for the guide.

Probably the most visually interesting part of the special exhibit was the set of photographs from the 1890s Pennsylvania expedition. We acknowledge the generous assistance of the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania in providing these photographs.

Richard L. Zettler, a former Nippur expedition member who is now at Pennsylvania, was very helpful in choosing specific photographs and expediting the orders.

The most affecting part of the exhibit for Oriental Institute staff and our long-term public supporters was probably a section with photos of past expedition teams, especially those featuring the late Carl Haines and his wife Irene with Carleton and Alice, their children who grew up in Afaj. Irene, Carleton, and Alice were able to join us for the opening night.

The turn-away crowd at the dinner had a chance to see the latest computer methods of presenting plans and objects. John and Peggy Sanders came from Arizona to show the results of their latest work with our material. We need to thank IBM for the loan of a PS2-80 computer and monitor and Jerry Rubin of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, for other

hardware and for technical assistance in making this demonstration possible.

The expedition owes a debt of gratitude for the exhibit to the Museum Staff, especially Ray Tindel, James Richerson, Philip Petrie, Laura D'Alessandro, John Larson, and Jean Grant. We would also like to thank Kim Coventry for her special efforts to gain publicity for the exhibition. I must also mention Joan Barghusen, who produced a digested, two-page version of the walking guide to Nippur in the Mesopotamian Hall as part of her educational program.

Gretel Braidwood and Kathy St. John in the the Membership Office are also to be acknowledged for making the event a success. A great deal of volunteer effort lay behind the evening. Several "Friends of Nippur" furnished their time, ideas, and work. These include Eileen Hamer, Rita and Kitty Picken, Kathryn Kimball, Jane Imberman, Dorothy Hawley, Marie Louise Gardner, and Margaret Schröeder. Prior to opening night Mary Jo Khuri and Mary Shea hosted a Friends of Nippur tea. I am especially grateful to Mary Jo Khuri for the preparation and mailing of Friends of Nippur newsletters during the year and to Janet Helman for preparing a computerized mailing list.

I wish to acknowledge the continuing financial support of all the Friends of Nippur, whose generosity makes our work possible. This private aid has been critical during the past few seasons when wartime conditions have made foundation grants even less obtainable.