

NIPPUR AND UMM AL-HAFRIYAT

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Work at Nippur still remains impossible due to the embargo on Iraq, so there is nothing new to report from the field, but there is progress on the analysis and writing up of reports on the work already carried out. One major result of the excavations that we initiated on the West Mound in 1972 has even made it into print. *Nippur IV*, Steven Cole's study of the group of eighth century B.C. cuneiform tablets that had been used to fill in around a child's burial in Area WB, went to the printers in the spring of 1996. These tablets, the remnants of the official correspondence of the governor of Nippur, have furnished extraordinarily information on the end of a period of Babylonian history that has been characterized as a Dark Age. With its reports of the governor's dealings with the king in Babylon, with nomadic and settled Aramaeans around Nippur, with its evidence for irrigated farmland, marshes, and desert, the archive reflects the process through which southern Mesopotamia began to revive after several centuries of decline.

James A. Armstrong is taking time from his duties as Curator of the Harvard Semitic Museum this summer to finish the revision of his important manuscript based on excavations in Area WC-3 and TC, the latter of which was done to resolve problems raised by earlier Chicago work on Tablet Hill. In this book, Armstrong is dealing with the archaeological evidence for the same set of problems that has occupied Cole, but his scope is broader. He traces the collapse of Nippur in the end of the second millennium, through the centuries of abandonment and revival, leading to the reign of the Chaldean kings, such as Nebuchadnezzar.

Augusta McMahon, who now teaches at Cambridge University, England, sends me e-mail messages and hard-copy manuscript related to her publication on the transition from the Early Dynastic to the Akkadian period. This book is, essentially, a report of her excavations at Area WF. There is a very good chance that her full manuscript will be ready for the editors this year.

Meanwhile, I have been working toward publication of the report on Umm al-Hafriyat. This site, whose name means "Mother of Excavations," was called that long before Saddam Hussayn's "Mother of Battles" gave the idiom to the world. The site is located about 28 km to the east of Nippur and was excavated in 1977 as an adjunct to the Nippur operations. The reason for the excavations was in a sense salvage, because the site was being excavated illegally by nomads. Robert McC. Adams was doing sur-

face survey in the mid-1970s, while our expedition was at Nippur. He came in one afternoon to report that he had seen a “huge Akkadian site” being badly damaged. I went out and took a look at it and decided that the site was an important one and might give us much needed information on the Akkadian period. It was clear from even that first inspection, however, that although the damaged area was Akkadian in date (ca. 2300 B.C.) there were remains of other periods there also.

I applied for permission to dig Umm al-Hafriyat in 1977 and we spent an unusually productive two and a half months there in the fall of that year. The Akkadian remains were right near the surface of one mound of the four or five that composed the site. We excavated two houses in that area, found remarkable evidence of the Akkadian period, and recovered among other things about fifteen cylinder seals from burials under the residences. On other mounds, we had evidence of occupation from the Uruk period (ca. 3500 B.C.), Ur III to Old Babylonian (2200–1800 B.C.), Kassite (ca. 1250 B.C.), and Seleucid (ca. 300 B.C.). Most remarkably, out in this desert area, we were able to see remains of a major river and a set of canals that surrounded the mounds. By carrying out a controlled surface collection on the entire site, we discovered two major facts: (1) the site was not a very large one in any period, although the entire site was huge; clearly, the site was a small one that shifted its location through time; and (2) much of the spread of pottery around the site was due to the fact that there are over 400 pottery kilns of different ages. The pottery kilns, and the great amounts of ash that they produced, accounted for the quick accumulation of debris in the houses, leading the inhabitants to relocate fairly often.

I wanted to return to Umm al-Hafriyat for a second season, but salvage work in the Hamrin Basin necessitated the postponement of that work. Later, during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) it was obvious that it was more sensible to work at Nippur rather than in the more exposed and isolated desert location of Umm al-Hafriyat. In the late 1980s, we were able to do some mapping of the pottery kilns and date them individu-

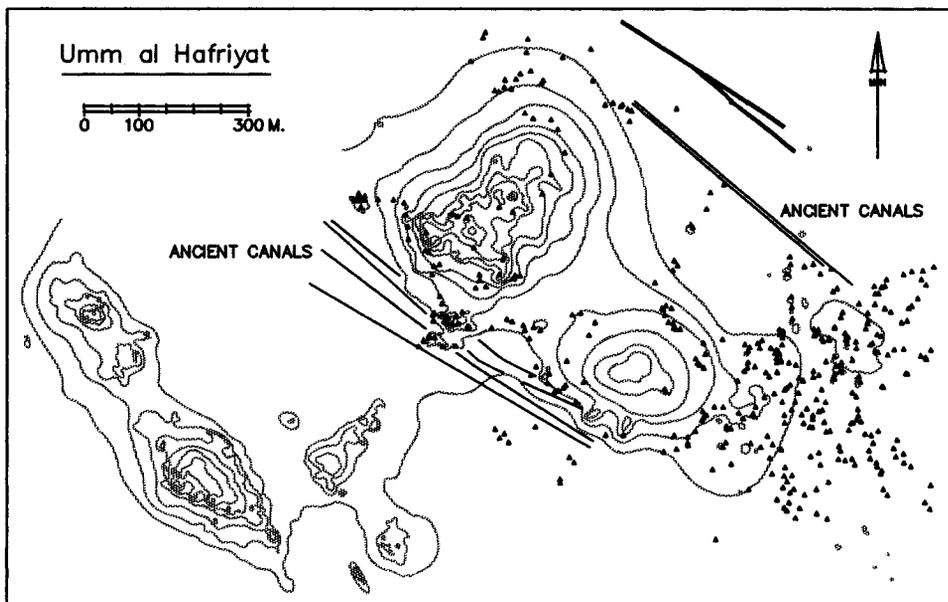


Figure. Site plan of Umm al-Hafriyat

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ally by the pottery around them, as well as have experts such as Pamela Vandiver (Smithsonian) and Abraham Van As and Lou Jacob (Leiden) take scientific samples from the site and the kilns. But the planned return to excavate Umm al-Hafriyat has not taken place. We will be able to carry out some research on the site and its area, however, through study of satellite images, when we have completed the establishment of a remote sensing laboratory in the Oriental Institute. If we are lucky, we should be able to map with such images all of the water courses that showed up so remarkably one day when we were visiting the site, right after a rain. Then, for part of a day, it was clear that groups of pottery kilns lay on the banks of a major line of the Euphrates that passed through the site, and that other kilns lined the banks of canals that fed from that river. Had we been able to raise a kite over the site that day for an aerial photograph, we would have had the information on film. As it was, when we returned the next day with the kite, nothing was apparent anymore and there was not enough wind to lift the kite.

This year, I finally decided that I should go ahead and write up the results of our first season at Umm al-Hafriyat. It is one of the few mainly industrial towns ever discovered in Mesopotamia. We have evidence not just for pottery-making, but for brick-making as well. We even have brick fragments with stamps indicating that they were destined for Nippur, but because the stamp used to make the inscription had been made wrong, the bricks were not sent off. The reason this site specialized in pottery-making was most probably the nature of the clay available. The site, resting on an ancient river levee, had remarkably plastic clay. We were made aware of its unusual quality when, after a rain, the mud would cling to our shoes, and the surface of the ground would dry out in a very short time.

I am trying to complete the Umm al-Hafriyat manuscript during the summer of 1996. Next in line for completion is a report on the Parthian, Sasanian, and Islamic (ca. A.D. 100–800) remains encountered in Area WG on the West Mound at Nippur. That manuscript is, in fact, three-quarters finished, including specialist reports on pottery and other groups of material.

In conclusion, let me say once again this year that although we are unable to return for fieldwork in Iraq, we continue to hope that there will be a change in the embargo that allows cultural contacts, including archaeological fieldwork. In the interim, we carry out that most necessary task of archaeology, the writing of reports on the findings. Although it is not as obviously exciting, nor as likely to gain the interest and backing of foundations and individuals, publication is the main aim of digging. Once we have excavated, the focus of our work has disappeared until it is put on paper, or increasingly these days, on computer. I want to thank those faithful Friends of Nippur who still support this vital work even though we cannot, each year, report the discovery of another temple, the location of "the golden boat," or even the world's earliest rent-a-bed contract.
