



*Sumerian statues from Nippur.
About 2600 B.C.*

THE NIPPUR EXPEDITION

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Soon after the decipherment of cuneiform tablets was begun, the ancient city of Nippur was known to be an important place. It was the holy city of the Sumerians; the assembly of gods was thought to have met there and it was the duty of the city god of Nippur, Enlil, to carry out the assembly's decisions. Even when the center of power moved to Babylon and later to Assur and Nineveh, Nippur still was held in special veneration and its sacred character was preserved. Such a city was unique among the shifting political capitals of ancient Mesopotamia.

In 1888, the first American archeological expedition to the Near East went out from the University of Pennsylvania to excavate the ruins of this important city. They dug intermittently until 1900 and their significant findings posed as many problems as they solved. In twelve years of intermittent digging, they located the religious center of the city, the Ekur with its ziggurat and temple to Enlil; they found thousands of cuneiform tablets, not only business contracts but many literary compositions as well; they superficially investigated the "busi-

ness” section and no more than touched the fortifications of the city. Although excavation techniques were not as well developed then as now, this work removed any doubt about the wealth of information still buried beneath the surface of the mound.

In 1948, an expedition from the Oriental Institute and the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania returned to Nippur to resume the excavations under the direction of D. E. McCown. In its first three winter seasons, it completed the study of the temple of Enlil and the stratigraphic excavation of the Scribal Quarter. Additional hundreds of literary tablets were found in the latter which should provide many additional sights into Sumerian aesthetics and thought.

Since 1953, the Institute has had five additional seasons at Nippur, sponsored jointly with the Baghdad School of the American Schools of Oriental Research. These were devoted at first to the excavation of a small early temple and later to a study in depth of a temple dedicated to the goddess Innana. In its ten major rebuildings, the excavators were able to follow the development of the Innana temple over a period of almost three thousand years. This in itself is noteworthy, but the excavation also yielded many important pieces of sculpture which can contribute much to our knowledge of Sumerian art.

General view of Inanna Temple at Nippur



Yet, if one were to fly over the mound of Nippur, it would be difficult to locate the small excavated areas in the great acreage as yet untouched. Even the heart of the Religious Quarter, the Ekur, is not entirely excavated. The fortifications are still to be traced; the course of the waterway through the city is known only as a depression in the mound's surface; and some of the later historical periods, which are well represented at Nippur and about which we know too little, await investigation. In fact, the Institute's continuing program of excavation at Nippur poses the question of which of these problems should have priority.

In studying the composition and growth of such a large city, important insight can also be gained from smaller settlements in the environs. Many exist around Nippur, and one of a very early period was excavated under the direction of Donald P. Hansen in the spring of 1963. Little more than a month's digging has shown its potential worth for a broader understanding of the emergence of urban life in ancient Sumer.