

## Nippur

### *McGuire Gibson*

#### BACK TO TABLET HILL: SIXTEENTH SEASON AT NIPPUR, 1985

When I became director of Nippur in 1972, I decided that we should ignore for a while the better known parts of the site, such as the sacred precinct around the ziggurat and Tablet Hill, where important Sumerian literary tablets had been found by the Pennsylvania Expedition of the 1890's and again by the Joint Expedition in the early 1950's. By shifting to the West Mound, we intended to gain some idea of overall city plan, as well as determine specific functions for parts of the site. We expected to expose some government buildings and houses, so that we could elucidate the life of non-religious, non-governmental people in this highly institutionalized city.

As part of our investigation of the West Mound, we spent several seasons excavating at the southern corner of the city (Area WC). Briefly stated, the settlement history at the southern corner of Nippur was as follows. In the Ur III period (c. 2100–2000 B.C.) the city expanded greatly to include this area. In the succeeding periods, the city contracted substantially and for about five hundred years there was no real settlement in the WC area, although palm orchards and gardens may have been cultivated here, within the city wall. Only in the 13th Century, B.C., under the Kassite dynasty, was WC again occupied by houses that were so big we used the term “villas” to describe them. Nippur then underwent another settlement contraction and WC was abandoned until the 7th Century, B.C., when both large and small dwellings and public buildings occupied this corner. Subsequently, the city shrank again and was never reoccupied. Thus, the 7th Century buildings were isolated stratigraphically.

The 7th Century is of special interest to archaeologists who wish to study major political change and its relationship to general cultural evolution. The earlier centuries of the 1st Millennium in Babylonia were a “Dark Age,” a time of weak, short-term rulers, shadowy dynasties, and the arrival of new ethnic groups such as the Arameans and Arabs. Beginning in the late 9th Century, B.C., Assyrian kings took an active role in the affairs of Babylonia, sometimes ruling it through local men, sometimes directly, sometimes through sons installed on the Babylonian throne. Throughout the time of

Assyrian domination, there were Babylonian revolts, often led from Nippur.

The Assyrian hold on Babylonia was especially strong in the 7th Century, when the Assyrian prince, Shamash-shum-ukin, ruled as king of Babylonia while his brother, Assurbanipal, ruled in Assyria. After 18 years, Shamash-shum-ukin led a great alliance in revolt against Assurbanipal and was finally defeated and disappeared from history in 647 B.C. Thereafter, Nippur reversed its role as a leader of rebellion and became a pro-Assyrian stronghold. The city withstood a lengthy siege carried out by Babylonians, but was eventually incorporated as part of a resurgent Babylonia under the Chaldean Dynasty.

Before our current program of work, relatively little attention had been paid archaeologically to the early 1st Millennium in Babylonia. There was an important stratigraphic trench, TA, made by McCown and Haines at Nippur in the early 1950's; here, tablets relating the horrors of the 7th Century siege were discovered. Assurbanipal's restoration of the ziggurat at Nippur was readily apparent. Elsewhere, important graves and buildings of the Assyrian domination were known from work done early in this century at Babylon, and finds at Ur, Uruk, and a few other sites helped somewhat to fill the enormous gap. A relative scarcity of Babylonian tablets from this range of time also made it difficult to assess Babylonian history.

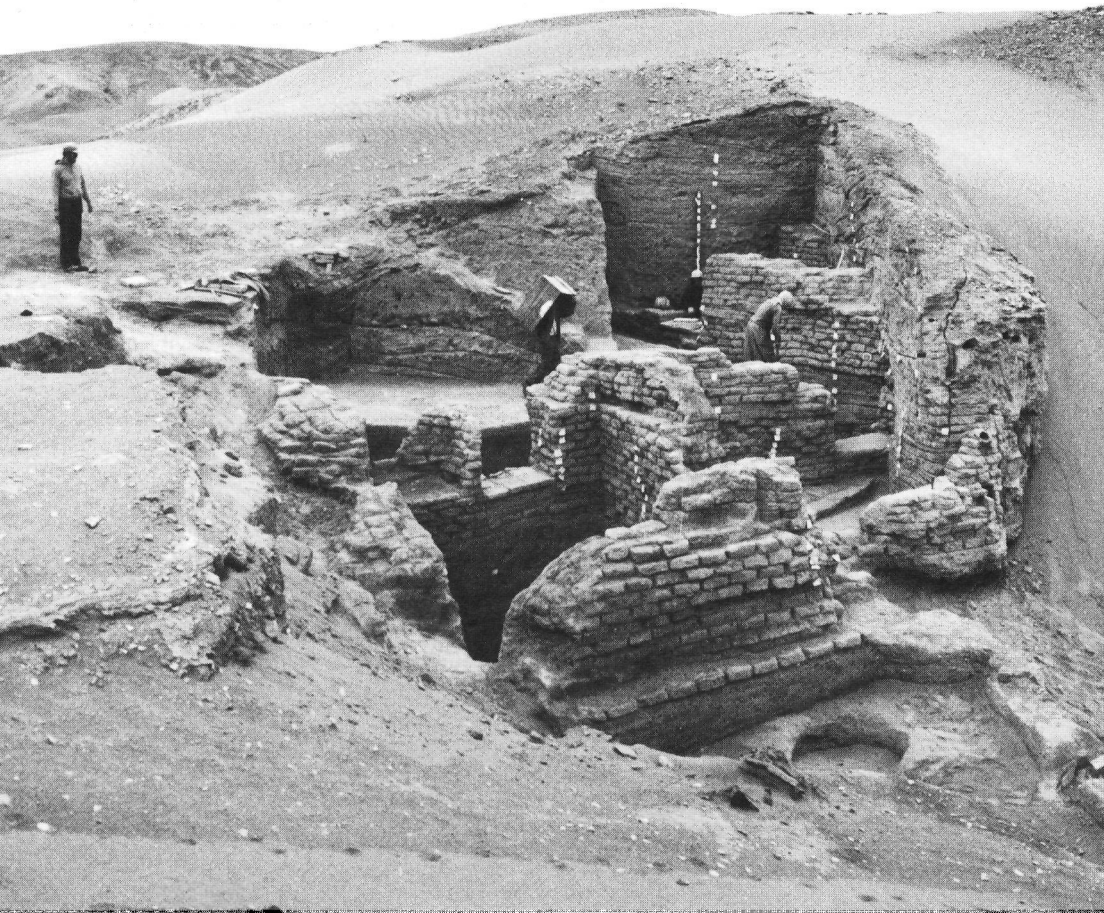
In contrast, an enormous amount of excavation in Assyria over the last hundred and forty years has brought to light numerous palaces, temples, fortifications, houses, graves, hundreds of meters of stone reliefs, thousands of tablets, and many thousands of objects. Consequently, we have come to view Babylonia through Assyrian eyes. Recently, however, J. A. Brinkman has shown that a careful reassessment of the Babylonian cuneiform documents that are available for the early 1st Millennium can result in throwing some light on the Dark Age. Babylonia was not as poor as has been thought, nor as abandoned. Our own work has added substantially to the body of written evidence. In 1973, during the 12th Season, we found about a hundred tablets around a burial jar. These tablets, datable to about 750 B.C., represent a sizable supplement to the available documentation. A Chicago student, Stephen Cole, is using the tablets for his doctoral dissertation and the completion of his work is eagerly awaited.

In order to put the 7th Century pottery and other artifacts we had found in Area WC into a stratigraphic context, and in order to verify once again the relevant sequence published by McCown and Haines in *Nippur I* (OIP 78), we decided

that we should put a new stratigraphic pit into Tablet Hill. We had originally thought we would do this operation as part of our 15th Season (1981–82), but logistical problems intervened. In our 1985 campaign, the 16th Season, we focused our main attention on this particular operation.

The staff consisted of myself as director and photographer, James A. Armstrong, assistant director and archaeologist, John C. Sanders as architect, Robert D. Biggs as epigrapher and site supervisor, Margaret Brandt as geomorphologist and registrar, Beverly M. Armstrong as house manager, cook, and records assistant. Stephen Lintner, who has been our geomorphologist since the mid-1970's was able to spend a week with us, although he is otherwise fully employed. He worked with Miss Brandt on the interpretation of soil strata she had exposed. Mrs. Marny Akins joined us for two weeks and helped carry out some surface collection as well as pottery repair and drawing. Her husband, Ambassador James Akins, visited for two days. We also had the help of Mark Newton for several weeks of the season. His father, David Newton, has just been named the first American Ambassador to Iraq since 1967. Ambassador Newton studied archaeology in col-

*Trench TC, from the East, with sand filling Trench TA on right. Walls of 8th-7th Century house are clearly visible. Jim Armstrong, on left, supervises clean-up for final photographs.*



lege and retains an active interest. We were greatly aided by him, his wife, and his staff during our stay in Iraq, and we are most grateful. We would also like to acknowledge the help and continuing encouragement of Dr. Moayyad Sa'id Damirchi, President of the State Organization of Antiquities, Dr. Abd-as-Sittar al-Azzawi, Director General of Antiquities of the Southern Region, and the two representatives, Sayyid Muhammad Yahya (with us for the third time) and Sayyid Hassan Khdheyr Hashim who made our work easier and more effective. Nur Kadhim, the unretired retired guard still does his job with vigor and integrity.

The season began with my arrival in Baghdad on January 19, 1985, ahead of the rest of the crew. Two weeks were spent in filling out official papers, gathering supplies, and renting a double-cabbed pickup truck, the ideal dig vehicle. Shortly after the arrival of the staff, work began at the site (February 7) and continued until March 20, with the last of us leaving Baghdad for home on March 30.

Having decided to work on Tablet Hill, we faced a set of digging conditions that we had almost forgotten. On the low, southern part of the mound at WC, we had become accustomed to work without sand. On Tablet Hill, even though the sand is gradually moving away, there are still a few dunes in every direction. As the men continued to carry away the dirt, they churned up the surface of the mound and it became a fine powder, much finer than the sand. On days when the wind came from the north or northwest, we had blowing sand. On days when the wind shifted to the south, we had the powder drifting in on us. Adding to the discomfort was the fact that in our excavation we had to remove a mass of ash, about three meters deep, above the buildings we hoped to expose. From the 1973 season, when we last worked on the high mounds, we had about twenty pairs of goggles still intact. Since we eventually hired thirty men and some of the goggles got broken, there was keen competition for them. Of course, high on the list of items for next season are goggles.

Our aims this season were relatively limited. We knew that the 7th Century was represented on Tablet Hill, having been exposed in Trench TA. We also knew from the publication of that trench that there were remains from the time before and after the 7th Century. Here, we could gain a sequence for the early 1st Millennium that should show us continuities or discontinuities in pottery and other artifacts. Our strategy was simple—put a new pit at the south end of TA and take it as far down as the Kassite (13th C.) levels. Initially, we thought we would have a problem finding workmen so we assumed that we would be lucky to make a 5 x 10 meter pit. As it happened, we found enough workmen to expand the

operation into two 10 x 10 meter squares and were able to penetrate to the Old Babylonian level (c. 1750 B.C.) in part of one of the squares. We were able to open this large area and go so deeply because of three factors. The first was a massive Pennsylvania trench that came in from the south and went off to the northeast, cutting down to at least the Old Babylonian level; we emptied the sand and debris from the Pennsylvania trench as fast as the men could carry it. The second factor was the erosion of part of the digging area along an access ramp that had been cut by the Chicago expedition in the early 1950's. The third was the deep bed of ashes, clearly a refuse tip, over half the excavation. After careful sampling of about a quarter of the ash with small trenches, we took down the remainder of the refuse with as much dispatch as was reasonable. The ash could be dated by sherds and other artifacts to the Achaemenid and Seleucid periods (c. 538–150 B.C.).

Under the refuse was a group of storage pits which furnished our only well-stratified evidence of Neo-Babylonian occupation (625–539 B.C.). The pits had been cut down into floors of a large, substantial house of mudbricks. We exposed three rooms and part of the courtyard. Under the floors in one room there were several burials, almost all in large jars. Only one of these burials was intact, however, having been found by tunnels burrowed in from the old Pennsylvania trench. On the floors above the burials, we found areas of black, ashy burning, signs that a fire had been lit. In two cases, we could see the evidence of a four-footed, rectangular brazier, the feet showing as clean squares in the ash. These fires may have been merely for heating the rooms, but we would surmise that this room was reserved for burials and veneration of the family and the fires were for rituals.

The artifacts found in the house were relatively few, implying a well-kept, neat house. There were sherds and a few broken animal and human figurines, but not the richness of artifacts one would expect from a house of such proportions. There was one tablet dealing with the business affairs of a military man, but it had no date. Jim Armstrong, by comparing the pottery from this house and that at WC and elsewhere, has concluded that the house was in use during the 8th and 7th Centuries, B.C.

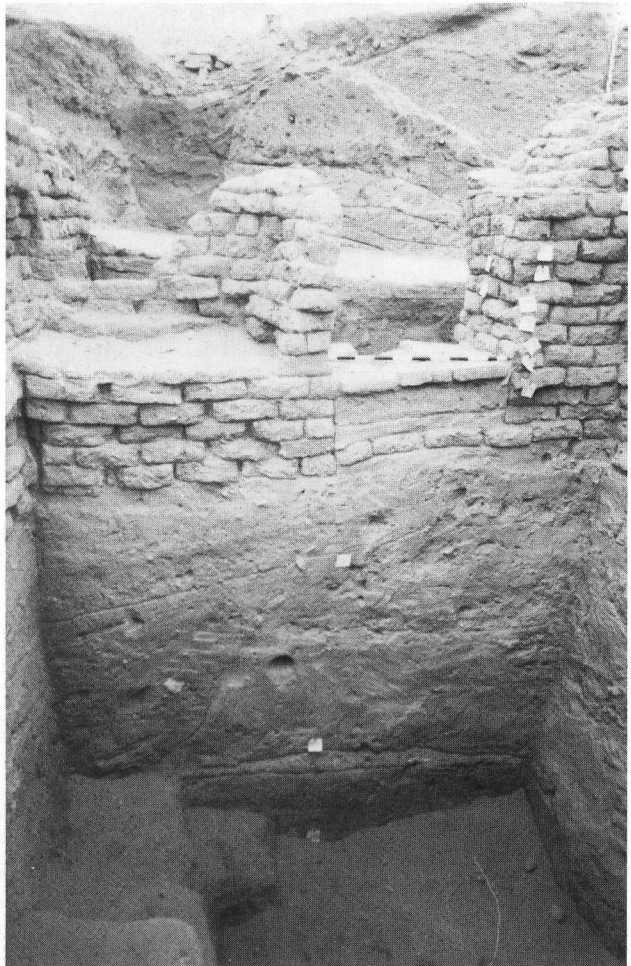
Our hope for a greatly detailed sequence below the house was not realized. Immediately below the foundations was a thin stratum (c. 10 cm) of debris with some Kassite sherds we would date to about the 13th Century, B.C. Below the Kassite stratum was a depth of two meters of sand resting on Old Babylonian houses. The sand showed ashy lenses, so we know there was some human activity on Tablet Hill be-



*Trench TC, from Northwest, with Jim Armstrong and workmen planning details. The once-straight baulk in the background has caved in because of the wind-erosion of sand in an old Pennsylvania trench.*

tween the Old Babylonian (c. 1750 B.C.) and the late Kassite. But, it looks as if Tablet Hill was in large part abandoned, with the exception of a thin occupation in the 13th Century, from the 18th Century until the 8th.

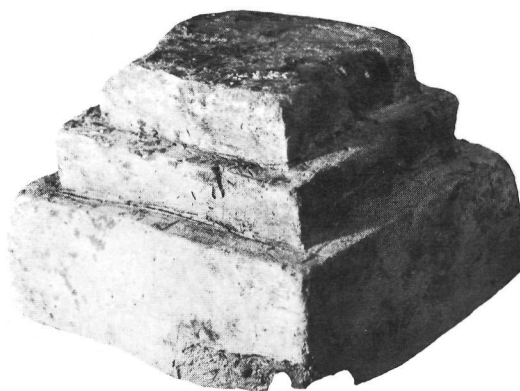
The Old Babylonian house remains at the bottom of our exposure, reached in great part by clearing out the old Pennsylvania trench, most probably had tablets within a few centimeters of the level we stopped digging. In the 1950's, Carl Haines had exposed part of the same house and had recovered many tablets on the floors. Had there been more



*Pit below 8th Century B.C. house, with more than a meter of sand resting on an Old Babylonian (18th C., B.C.) layer.*

than five days left of the season, we would have expanded our sounding to expose more of the Old Babylonian building. By that time, however, the finding of tablets would have meant many days of work to bake, repair, read, photograph and catalogue them. We left the tablets to another season and concentrated on solving problems in the upper levels.

The results of our season were gratifying, even though we found sand instead of a deep cultural stratification under the 7th–8th Century house. The lack of occupation of this part of the city for several centuries in the earlier half of the 2nd



*A baked-clay model of a ziggurat, found in the excavation. Size, about 5 cm × 5 cm by 5 cm.*

Millennium was to be expected, since we had previously found evidence for this gap in other areas. A second period of abandonment between the 13th and 8th Centuries might have been predicted, since there was a marked decrease in written documents during this time for all of Babylonia.

Having gained some ideas of the growth and decline of the city in various periods, our attention is now drawn to the ziggurat area. If the city was virtually abandoned for long periods, was the ziggurat, one of the oldest, most venerated shrines in Babylonia, also abandoned? Was there a small group of officials and functionaries living within the religious complex even when the rest of the city might be a ruin, looking probably not very different than the mound looks now? If the countryside was a desert, with the river and canals lying dry (as we think they were), how did the remnant of population get water? Investigation near the ziggurat might answer some of these questions and we are thinking of a return to that area in the very near future.





Plan of Nippur with Trench TC, Areas WD and WE marked.

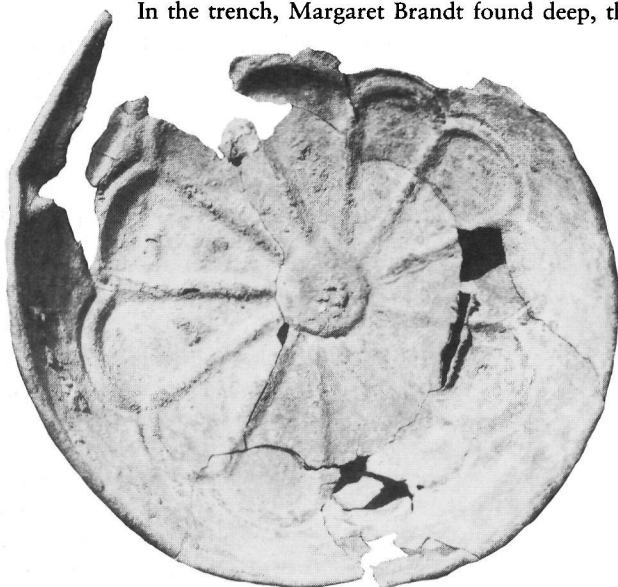
This last season, in order not to lose work on days with bad sandstorms, we laid out a square in the flat area between the expedition house and the high part of the West Mound (Area WD). Here, on two especially windy days, we sank two trenches to water level and found that there was no settlement after the Kassite period (c. 1250 B.C.). Another small square on the top of the West Mound (Area WE) was investigated only one afternoon and we had immediate evidence of Islamic houses datable to about A.D. 700. This last operation is the first controlled excavation of the Islamic levels at Nippur since the early 1950's. We intend to widen and deepen this area in subsequent seasons, perhaps with a step trench to gain an idea of stratigraphy in this area of the mound.

Work on any part of Nippur is easier to contemplate now that the sand is moving southeast, off the mound. As the sand moves, we see surface indications of buildings that have not been visible for more than fifty years. We can also see details of ancient and recent irrigation canals, ditches, and even field patterns that were not visible before. We can, thus, map the water system that fed the city and by collecting sherds along the canals, we can try to give dates for the various channels.

Margaret Brandt, in examining the landscape around the site, made it clear that we had a new opportunity for interesting research. She spent days criss-crossing the surrounding plain, making notes and sketches, and collecting plants and faunal specimens. Early in the season, she began to talk about a large site with glazed Islamic sherds. Being busy in the dig, I did not go out to the site, thinking from her description that it was far from the mound, but asked her to bring in sherds. These, being well glazed in black on cobalt blue drew me out to the site. This kind of pottery, datable to the 13th and 14th Centuries A.D., had not been recorded near Nippur by Bob Adams in his regional survey, and its presence implied a canal of the time that had not been suspected.

The site turned out to be no more than two hundred meters or so northeast of the ziggurat, a long stone's-throw from the city wall. The site is very low, but has a diameter of about three hundred meters. The surface, until this year covered by sand, was strewn with brightly glazed, excellently made pottery. There was also much metal, including an elaborate bronze bowl which we registered. We mapped the site, collected samples of sherds and other artifacts, and followed the canal on which it lies. The canal can be traced coming from the northwest down to and through the northernmost corner of Nippur, where it turns a corner and goes out through a gap in the city wall on the northeast. After passing through the

Islamic site, the canal continues to the southeast, visible on the surface for at least a kilometer. Air photographs of the area would show great detail that is not visible when one stands on the surface. We tried to get our kite up over the area, but the wind failed us on three different days. Since the site is so low, it will probably be plowed and planted upon soon, unless we mark it as archaeological territory by putting in a trench or two. We expect to do just that in our next field season (January–March, 1986). A large, deep trench across an adjacent canal, which we hired an excavating machine to cut, may serve to mark the remains there until our return. In the trench, Margaret Brandt found deep, thick layers of



*A bronze bowl with a rosette decoration found on the surface of the 13th Century A.D. Islamic site near the ziggurat. Bottom view, size about 10 cm dm.*

clay unparalleled in all our previous geomorphological work. This layer was the object of several days' examination by Brandt and Stephen Lintner, with thousands of minute insects as companions.

In Chicago, the work of analyzing material and preparing photos, plans, and manuscript for publication goes on. John and Peggy Sanders continue to produce plans on computers, at the same time revising the programs for mapping the excavation and recording the finds. They have tested refinements of the system on other digs in Arizona and Cyprus, and it is working well.

Also in Chicago, the Friends of Nippur remain a solid core of support for the fieldwork. The number of Friends is too great to list in detail, but we must express our thanks for their long-term interest and generosity.