

NIPPUR AND BEYOND

McGuire Gibson

As reported last year, we turned over to the Oriental Institute publications process the manuscript for the Inanna Temple report. As is the rule, the manuscript was sent out for a reading and evaluation by an outside expert, and it has been accepted for publication. The authors, primarily Richard Zettler, Karen Wilson, and Jean Evans, may want to make some final changes, but there is every chance that this much-anticipated report will be out in a year or so. I have lately turned my attention to other Nippur manuscripts, and I expect to make major progress on them in the coming year, when I will have a reduced teaching load.

Given the news that assaults us each day, with very destructive warfare occurring in Syria and Iraq, where we have major archaeological projects in stasis, the importance of published site reports takes on far greater significance. Such reports lay out the basic stratigraphic ordering of layers in the site, showing what is earlier and what is later, as well as the architecture exposed in those layers. The painstaking finding of objects and the precise recording of their findspots within that architecture not only allow us to suggest functions of rooms and buildings, but also to give a firm dating for the appearance of those artifacts. It is on the basis of such excavated objects that art historians can establish some anchoring pieces on which to trace the evolution of style. In future, such anchors are going to have a much greater role in scholarship because there is looting of ancient sites around the world on a scale that is unprecedented, and the trade in illicit antiquities is booming. The damage to Iraqi sites has been severe for almost two decades, although the pace has been abating in the past few years. But now, it has been reported that ISIS and other insurgents in Syria have been selling antiquities to support themselves, and they are now in northern Iraq. We are seeing satellite images showing systematic looting of sites in Syria, on a scale that matches the worst that was done in Iraq. For instance, the classical site of Apamea in Syria had no signs of looting in 2011 but in late 2013 it was a landscape of holes (fig. 1). You can bet that the international trade in antiquities has a lot more Roman glass and coins for sale these days.

We have no idea what is happening to our own site of Hamoukar in northeast Syria, although I did get word that our expedition house was broken into and robbed months ago. The objects from Hamoukar, a remarkable early city site, were stored in the museum of Deir ez-Zor. We have no information on the condition of the museum, nor whether or not the objects were taken to Damascus before the fighting grew intense. But we have seen TV footage of the town of Deir ez-Zor, and the damage to buildings is enormous. That war has now spilled over into Iraq, but so far we are hearing nothing about the destruction of ancient art, for instance the Neo-Assyrian relief slabs and statues, but we are not made confident by the images of the destruction by hammer of an Assyrian statue in the Museum at Raqqa in Syria. There is footage of the demolition of Shiite mosques in Mosul and Tell Afar in northern Iraq, but so far the major archaeological sites of Nineveh, Nimrud, and Khorsabad (which the Oriental Institute dug in the 1930s) seem to be untouched. With any period of chaos, however, people will take the opportunity to dig, hoping to find something that they can sell. Northern Iraq, which has been relatively free of looting when compared to the south, may be entering a period of major damage to sites.

NIPPUR AND BEYOND



Figure 1. Google satellite images of Apamea, Syria, in (top) 2011 and (bottom) 2013

In March, I was in the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, and I saw that the greatly augmented staff was well on its way to reinstalling all the museum halls, with labels in Arabic and English. The more spectacular objects, such as the Nimrud Queens' gold and the Ur Royal Cemetery treasures, were not on display, but there were still extraordinarily important artifacts in the cases. I saw a lot of familiar items that had been dug up at Nippur.

During the past thirty-four years, the movable objects in the museum cases have been removed and put in storage vaults several times. In 1991, just before the bombs fell in that war, most of the artifacts were put into storage vaults, leaving only the large-scale reliefs and other items in place. Then, in the late 1990s, they were partially displayed again, only to be taken down again in 2003. Finally, in 2014, they were coming up into the light of day once again. With any movement, artifacts stand a very good chance of being damaged, and with each transfer, valuable information can be lost, because the explanatory labels tend to be misplaced. Maybe the present crisis will pass and the objects will remain in place, but there is a very real possibility that they will once more go into hiding. If so, think how badly the museum staff will feel, having worked so hard and long to get the objects on display. Some of these men and women came to the Oriental Institute or the Field Museum for training in conservation and museum management a few years ago. We are, thus, reminded that behind all the losses of material objects, there are also human lives and aspirations at stake.
