

NIPPUR

M c G U I R E • G I B S O N

Even with the best intentions of everyone involved, the 17th Nippur season had to be postponed for the second year in a row. We sent in the required forms and the Iraqi authorities issued the permits and okayed visas, but there was a hitch somewhere in the transmission of the information. We waited in Chicago through the autumn of 1986, working on reports and ready to depart at a moment's notice, but the word never came.

In March, 1987, I went to Iraq to find out what had gone wrong with the visa notifications and to make more secure plans for a season of work in the fall. I found Baghdad much as I had left it in 1985, except that more new buildings had been completed. The staff in the State Organization of Antiquities was very gracious and was pleasantly surprised when I informed Dr. Moayyad that I had brought with me a hundred cuneiform tablets that had been borrowed by the expedition in the early 1950's. To call these items "tablets" is a bit misleading. These were really fragments that had broken off tablets in antiquity or in the course of excavation.

During the 3rd Nippur season (1951–52), the expedition recovered from Trenches TA and TB more than three thousand tablets and fragments, many written in the Sumerian language. When the season ended there were still several hundred small bits that had not yet been catalogued in detail. The epigrapher asked permission to take these fragments to Chicago for a year so that the reading and identification could be completed. It was thought that some pieces could be joined to other, larger, fragments. Almost all of the fragments brought to Chicago were lexical texts, that is tablets related to the meaning of words. In most cases, they were probably the exercises of student scribes. The epigraphers read and catalogued them, but then the process went awry. The fragments were never returned to Baghdad. After our attention was called to the situation last year, we took the tablets from their drawers and found that they needed repair and consolidation before their return. Augusta McMahan, an advanced graduate student in Mesopotamian archaeology, and Mar-



- *The new Saddam Reservoir created by building a dam north of Mosul, in Iraq. Islands in the distance are the tops of mounds that were excavated partially by Iraqi and foreign expeditions as salvage operations.*

garet Schröder began a program of baking and repair immediately. The first hundred fragments were ready for me to take in March. The rest of them will be delivered when we return for the upcoming season in the fall of 1987.

While in Iraq, I went down to Nippur with a group of students from the British Expedition. Anyone who made the arduous eight-hour journey to Nippur in the 1950's or the five-hour trip in the 1960's would be amazed to drive there now. The site is at present only an hour and a half from Baghdad by the new freeway. Because it is so reachable, with a secondary tarred road right up to the mound, Nippur has become popular with Iraqis and foreigners on weekends. Not so many years ago, authors described Nippur as having an eerie, desolate beauty. Other than the isolation due to bad roads, this description reflected the sand dunes that have covered the site for more than fifty years. Because only parts of the site were visible between dunes, Nippur was more mysterious than other mounds. The atmosphere was intensified by passing caravans of bedouin, eagles that hovered over the ziggurat, the foxes and wolves that scurried away when people approached.

● *The mound of Tell as-Sawda in the Jawf area of North Yemen. The upright stones are part of a temple that has not yet been excavated.*



For the past ten years or so the sand dunes have been moving off the site at an accelerating rate as the enormous dune belt that stretches for miles north, east, and southeast of Nippur, shifts away. There are still some major dunes on the mounds, but great parts of Nippur are now completely visible for the first time since the 1920's. The eagles, foxes, and wolves are still there, but I don't think they will be able to stay much longer. As I stood on the ziggurat this time, I could see that a sandstorm was raging in the distance, about a mile away, where the edge of the dune belt now lies. At Nippur, where previously we would have been involved in the sandstorm, the wind was throwing occasional scatters of sand our way, but there was no real discomfort.

In March, I saw for the first time baked-brick walls that the old Pennsylvania expedition had exposed in the 1890's. I was able to examine the sides of newly revealed trenches and could pull sherds from strata to gain an idea of the date of occupation in places I had not seen before. In short, the conditions that have made Nippur difficult to dig are changing drastically for the better.

As I indicated in last year's *Annual Report*, when we do get there for the 17th Season, we expect to be working near the ziggurat, where we intend to expose early levels of occupation. Work by Pennsylvania in this area indicated that we can expect Early Dynastic through Ur III levels and we think we have a good chance here of reaching the earliest occupation at the site, in the Hajji Muhammad phase of the prehistoric Ubaid Period (c. 4500 B.C.).

While we are excavating the earliest levels, we will also make trenches in the small Il-Khanid settlement just outside the city wall nearby. This settlement, exposed when the dunes moved, can be dated by pottery and coins picked up on the surface to the early 14th century, after the Mongol conquest. Until we saw this little mound, we had thought that settlement in the Nippur vicinity had come to an end about 1200 A.D.



● *A temple near Tell as-Sawda, showing upright posts and slanting roof slabs.*

Back in Baghdad, I joined up with David Stronach of the University of California at Berkeley, who had just arrived to investigate the possibilities of starting a project in the north of Iraq. We took a taxi to Mosul, where Dr. Abdul Sattar Al-Azzawi, the Director of Antiquities for the Northern Region, gave us great hospitality, including rooms in an old house on the top of Nebi Yunus. Nebi Yunus is the southern mound of Nineveh and was the site of a palace of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (680–669 B.C.). Little archaeological work has been done on this mound because it is dominated by an important mosque that is traditionally cited as the tomb of Jonah. Some Turkish-style houses surround the mosque and a cemetery covers the rest of the mound. Recently, the State Organization of Antiquities has been buying the houses and may

retain some of them as tourist attractions. Most, however, will be demolished to make excavation possible. In the process of demolition, the Antiquities Organization has already exposed a magnificent winged bull that must mark a major gateway of Esarhaddon's palace. This bull is remarkable not just in its finely rendered details, but in its construction. Whereas other winged Assyrian bulls, such as the one in the Oriental Institute, are of one large slab of limestone, this one was formed from several smaller blocks of stone. The head of the bull was removed in Islamic times, to make way for a house foundation, but the rest of the figure is in such good condition that we can anticipate extraordinary finds of relief sculpture in the building. Dr. Al-Azzawi and his staff are eager to get on with the work.

Stronach and I walked across much of Kuyunjik, the other, larger mound of Nineveh. Here, thousands of cuneiform tablets were found in the mid-1800's in the "library of Assurbanipal" and were taken to London to form the core of the British Museum collections. Here also were excavated the reliefs of Sennacherib and Assurbanipal, including the famous lion hunt series, that are on display in the British Museum.

● *Abandoned building built in 1957 of ancient stone blocks at Marib.*



Kuyunjik is a very large, high mound, reaching more than 20 meters in height. The mound's high edges are composed of dark red clay, in which you can sometimes see horizontal and vertical lines. The red clay is, in fact, an enormous city wall of unbaked bricks that was faced by a stone wall. At various points along the edge of the mound, water has cut gullies through the city wall and the occupational debris behind it. From the top of these gullies, one can see dozens of striations, blackened ash-strewn floors, limestone pavements, and blocks from walls. Stronach was looking for a good place to make a stratigraphic cut along one of the gullies, to gain a quick notion of the material in the high mound for later exploration. He also looked at several places on lower parts of the mound for possible sites of excavation. (Stronach returned for a season of digging at Nineveh in late Spring, 1987.)

From Mosul, we went west to Tell Afar, a beautiful little town located in low, rolling, grassy country. This town surrounds an ancient mound that has not been dug because there is a large, beautifully restored Ottoman fortress on top of it. This fortress sits on older Islamic and pre-Islamic buildings. The Ottoman fortress is now used as the local headquarters of the State Organization of Antiquities. At the time we visited, the British Expedition was being allowed to use part of the restored buildings as a residence and lab. The British, like several other foreign expeditions, have been working for several years in a salvage project along the Tigris, where a dam has been completed. Now the water has risen and the project is almost at an end. Attention is being turned to the plain north of Tell Afar, where hundreds of mounds dot the landscape. The British have already begun work on a very large mound called Tell al-Howa, which had important occupations of Uruk (3500 B.C.) and Neo Assyrian (8th–7th C. B.C.) times, as well as other periods. This area, completely within the rainfed agricultural belt, has always been a major food-producing region for Mesopotamia. There is already in progress a major project to bring water from the new reservoir by pipes to irrigate these fields and make them even more productive. Therefore, archaeological salvage must be carried out here also. We hope to take part in this work in the future.

I left Stronach and returned to Baghdad for further talks. Then I flew to North Yemen, where I had initiated a project ten years before. Dr. Selma Al-Radi, an Iraqi and an old Nippur hand (1964–65), is still working there as a consultant for the Yemeni Department of Antiquities. With her I once again explored the city of Sanaa, which is

significantly changed from the last time I saw it in 1981. Oil has been found in Yemen and the pace of life is quickening. The town has grown enormously, but the wonderful old houses are still much sought after and are as exciting to visit. I went with Dr. Al-Radi and two French archaeologists to Marib, where the Antiquities Department is conducting its first large-scale excavations. Marib, the capital of the Sabaeans (Sheba), is the most famous site in southern Arabia because of its remarkable ancient dam. With the production of oil east of Marib, the small town that used to rise up in multi-storied splendor atop the ancient mound has moved to a new location on the plain. The old town still has in it five or six families, but most of the tall, mud-constructed buildings are crumbling. That is just as well, since there will be excavations on the mound in a very few years.

The new town of Marib, strung out along both sides of the new highway from Sanaa, boasts a Sheraton under construction and four or five restaurants. The existing hotel, the Two Paradises, where we stayed for three nights, houses dozens of foreigners who are working for an American company involved in laying a pipeline. Hunt Oil has the major drilling concession and Exxon is exploring. People are already running their cars on Yemeni gasoline.

As a result of the new prosperity, many of the people of Marib are investing in artesian wells and are watering crops on the rich alluvial deposits that were laid down in the valley in antiquity. In the process, remnants of ancient irrigation canals and sluices are gradually disappearing but the ancient dam, which made the alluvial deposits possible, is still a witness to magnificent engineering. A new dam, up the wadi a few miles behind the ancient dam, is constructed in much the same way as its predecessor and will add some irrigation water to the valley, but the majority of farms will be watered by artesian wells.

In flattening land for a field in the alluvium, a bulldozer struck a building made of well-dressed stone. The Department of Antiquities halted the operation and Qadi Ismail Al-Aqwa, the Director, sent in a team to excavate. This is the first large, scientific excavation carried out by the Department. Dr. Al-Radi has been spending about three days a week with the expedition, advising and digging. In the three days we were there, the two French archaeologists made record photographs of the two buildings that have been exposed and made plans of them. I spent my time working with a pick and defining some mudbrick that had been built over and around the stone foundations. The

buildings are clearly religious in function, as shown not only by the plan, but also by motifs on dozens of fragments of decorated stone found in the burned debris. The foundations are of beautifully cut and laid ashlar masonry, often marked in Sabaean script. The superstructures were, apparently, of mudbrick and wood.



● *The town of Marib perched on the top of the ancient capital of the Sabaeans, North Yemen.*

We went to visit several sites in the valley, all presumably satellite towns and temples of the main *tell* of Marib. We visited the temple of the Moon God, excavated by Wendell Phillips in the early 1950's. We also saw another temple with tall, erect, stone pillars about 15 feet high awaiting excavation. The American Foundation for the Study of Man, which has been working in Yemen for five years on survey and soundings, hopes to begin digging at Marib in the near future. A German expedition has been doing intensive surveying and mapping of the area recently and other scholars have studied aspects of the site for a number of years.

One long day we went north of Marib into a remarkable area called the Jawf. Here, there is a string of ancient settlements, never before dug and seldom visited by foreigners until recently. On one site, there is extraordinary preservation of wood. The tops of wooden pillars project from the *tell* so that you can see mortices and pinions. In places, slabs of decorated and inscribed stone mark the position of major buildings. At another site, there is a fascinating temple with elaborately decorated slabs. The vertical stone columns stand in place and the stone roof slabs lean against them, ready to be lifted back into place. Here, it is apparent that with little excavation and a lot of care,



- *One of the two main sluice gates left from the destruction of the famous dam at Marib, North Yemen.*

one can expose a complete plan of the temple and restore it as it was when built in 300 B.C. or earlier. At the same site, local people have been making unofficial excavations. Here they found dozens of small pieces of wood with inscriptions on them. The National Museum in Sanaa has obtained some of these items. Epigraphers who have examined them say that the writing is a cursive form of Early South Arabic script, not known before. This cursive script is different from the beautiful, geometric, Early South Arabic script that occurs on hundreds of stone slabs in buildings all over Yemen and will take some time to decipher. One of the epigraphers I spoke to thinks that the wooden documents are probably the day to day records of a temple or government building. These documents are, then, of extraordinary importance for the reconstruction of history and daily life in ancient Yemen.

Archaeologically, North Yemen is in general on the threshold of tremendous developments. In recent years, although Yemeni, Iraqi, American, Canadian, French, British, Italian, and German expeditions have been working in the country, only surveys and very limited soundings have been permitted. Now, however, real digging is starting. With economic development, the Department of Antiquities will be obliged to do more and more salvage operations and is encouraging foreign teams to excavate. Besides the probable expedition of the American Foundation at Marib, digs will be started this coming year at a number of sites. A Canadian expedition, headed by Edward Keall (another old Nippur hand, 1966–67), will

work at a magnificent Islamic town called Zabid. The French will begin in the coming year on one of the sites in the Jawf. The Italians will initiate a very elaborate, long-term project for the excavation and restoration of Barakish, a site with city walls that are intact up to 14 meters high. Here there is an Islamic settlement resting on an ancient one. The Islamic occupants used parts of the older ruins in their houses. Thus, much of the ancient stone work is intact. At one place, I crawled through a stone-built opening and lay down to see the sunlight coming through thin roof slabs of alabaster. This roof and the building of which it is a part, cannot be dated securely as yet, but it is safe to say that I was lying under a roof that is about two thousand years old.

On my return to Chicago, I resumed working on the Nipur volume that has involved me and a number of others for several years. John Sanders and Peggy Bruce Sanders delivered final plans of architecture and objects for the volume. I have finished most of the descriptive and analytical sections on Area WA, where we exposed parts of a series of temples, and the Ur III city wall in Area WC. Judith Franke completed her Ph.D. dissertation on the Old Babylonian houses at Area WB and is converting that into her portions of the volume on the Old Babylonian and Kassite occupations of WB. Richard L. Zettler, who is now on the faculty of Pennsylvania, is finishing his sections on the Kassite building in Area WC, as well as analytical studies of the pottery of the earlier periods. James A. Armstrong is completing his chapter on the 7th century buildings in Area WC and analyses of the pottery of the later periods encountered in our work. We hope that concentrated effort in the summer of 1987 will bring the volume close to publication.

While working to publish the results of past seasons, we are planning for future campaigns. In the past three years, we have been cooperating closely with the Belgian Expedition on a number of technical projects. We have agreed to share certain kinds of technical staff, for example geomorphologists, zoologists, and botanists. Stephen Lintner and Margaret Brandt have already visited the Belgian site of Tell ed-Deir and have exchanged soil samples and information. In the future, members of our staff will spend time with the Belgian Expedition and vice versa. We are also beginning to cooperate on ceramic technology studies and the compilation of a corpus of pottery types for the historic periods. We are hoping to combine settlement pattern information and geomorphological studies for a general view of the Mesopotamian alluvium through time.



● *Barrakesh, an important town north of Marib, North Yemen. The lower parts of the walls are pre-Islamic. The upper parts are Islamic constructions.*

The German expedition from the University of Munich is also working with us on some aspects of these projects and we hope others will join.

In Chicago, our work is aided, as usual, by the generosity of the Friends of Nippur. Although we have had no new archaeological excavations to report, the Friends have continued to contribute to our research. I would like to acknowledge, in particular, a generous gift from Mrs. Carolyn Livingood, in memory of her husband Jack, who was one of the original Friends. Likewise, I must thank Mrs. William F. Regnery for her gift in memory of Jack.