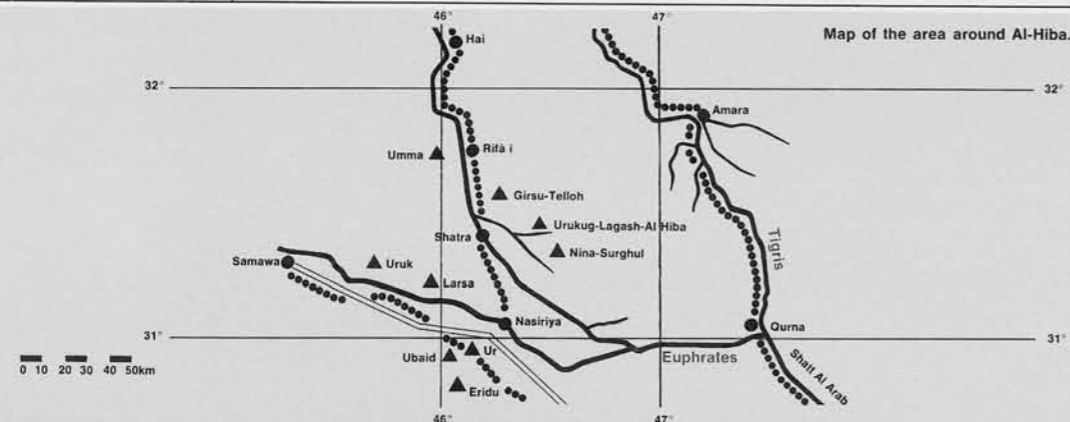


Excavations in the Swamps of Sumer Vaughn E. Crawford



2

My first visit to Al-Hiba was in November, 1953, when I was a member of an archaeological survey led by Thorkild Jacobsen of the Oriental Institute. At that time we spent a few hours examining this huge tell where we are presently working.

Since neither W. K. Loftus who visited and made soundings at many sites in southern Iraq between 1849 and 1854 nor E. de Sarzec who excavated at Telloh mentions having gone to Al-Hiba, the honor for the first Westerner to set foot on Al-Hiba may well belong to William Hayes Ward and his Wolfe Expedition in 1885, an expedition financed by Catherine Lorillard Wolfe who

was the only woman among the original one hundred and six subscribers to The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1870.

The first excavations on the mound were directed by the German archaeologist Robert Koldewey from March 29 to May 5, 1887. Koldewey concluded that Al-Hiba was a necropolis because he found many graves which lay beneath the floors of houses.

Al-Hiba has attracted other visitors since 1885 but no further excavations since those of 1887 until the arrival of the present expedition. A survey of sites in southern Iraq in the autumn of 1965 by Donald P. Hansen and me led to the

choice of Al-Hiba as the site proposed to the trustees of our respective institutions, namely, the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, as a likely place at which to excavate. The proposal was accepted with provision for a minimum trial period of five seasons. Financing has been provided generously by the Lester and Kathlyn Wolfe Foundation—hence the name, The Wolfe Archaeological Expedition of The Metropolitan Museum of Art with the collaboration of the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University—and by the Trustees of the Museum and the Institute. What a coincidence it is to have a second Wolfe Expedition at Al-Hiba!

We were fortunate to receive permission from the Iraq Government to begin our excavations at Al-Hiba in the autumn of 1968. From the very beginning of our efforts to organize the dig and to get it into operation we have enjoyed nothing but the finest cooperation first from Dr. Faisal al-Waily and then from his successor, Dr. Isa Salman, the Director-General of Antiquities, and the Iraq Department of Antiquities of which he is head.

Don and I arrived in Baghdad in mid-September 1968, having already collected many items for shipment via air freight from New York to Baghdad. Our major concern was to construct an expedition headquarters. Having lived in many other expedition houses made of sun-dried or burned bricks, we naturally thought of a house made of those materials. Soon, however, we had the firm opinion of a reputable building contractor from the environs of Shatra, our shopping town some fifteen miles to the west of Al-Hiba, that the soil of the mound itself and of adjacent areas was too salty to make sun-dried bricks that would last. Moisture would destroy them much too quickly. To bring in fired bricks by boat would destroy our budget. Two possibilities remained, namely, canvas tents or reed "Quonset" huts. Tents have the disadvantage of requiring putting up and taking down at the beginning and end of each season while providing no permanent storage space for

1
A pair of *taradas* in the marsh near the high point of Al-Hiba.

2
Village on the east bank of the Abu Simak canal.

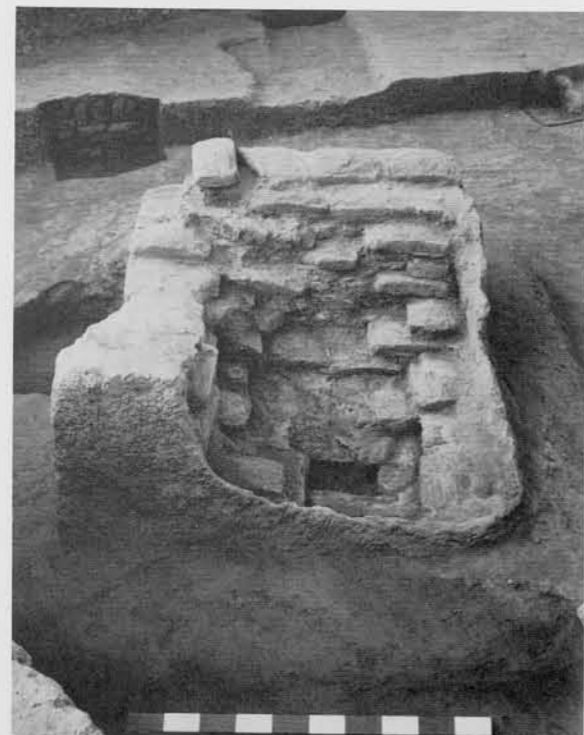
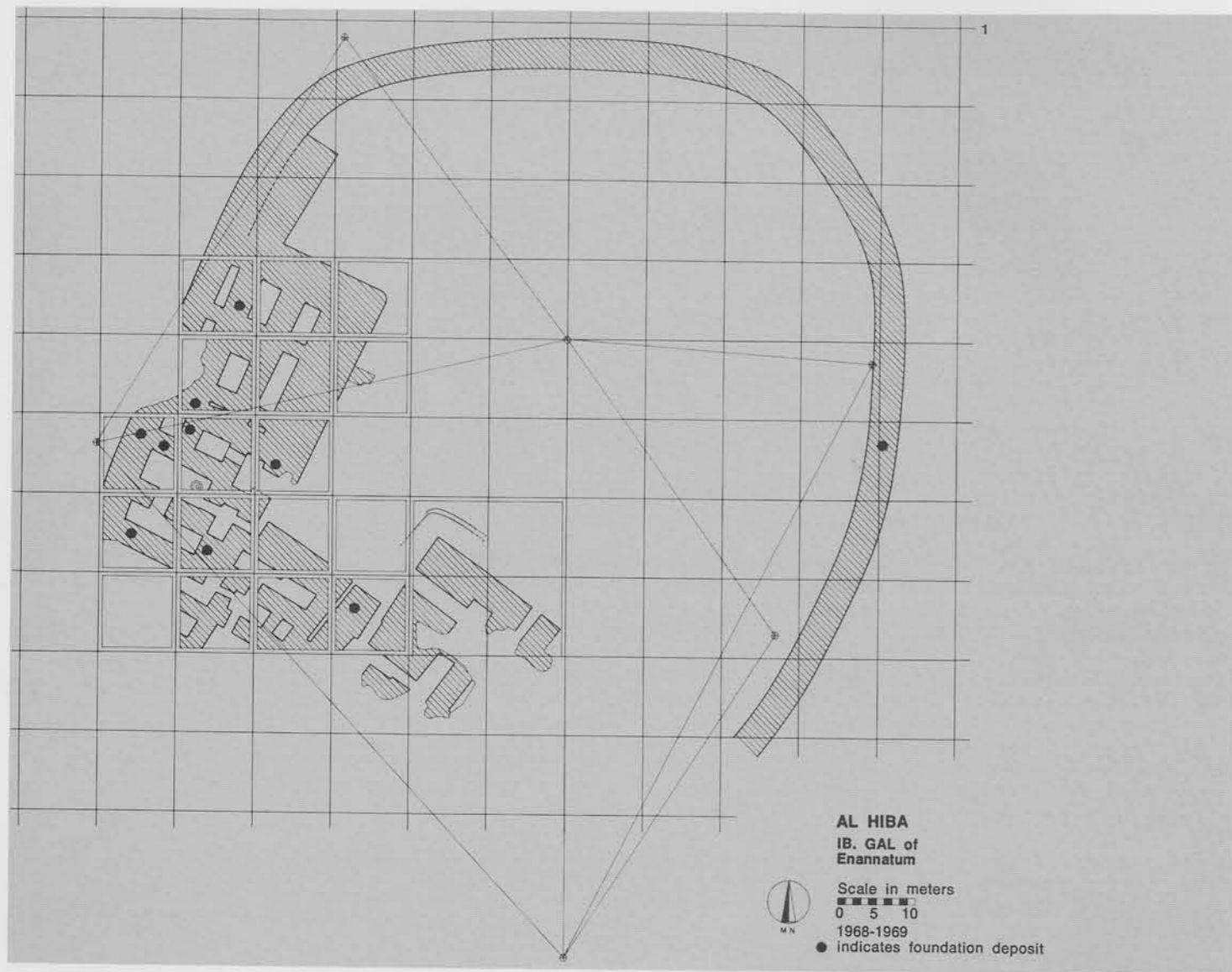
expedition equipment. Since reed construction of the type mentioned has been employed in the region for millennia, we voted for it. Unfortunately, reeds from the marshes on three sides of Al-Hiba are unsuitable for making the reed bundles and reed mats necessary to produce the reed arches, cross-members, and covering mats of the reed "Quonset" huts. This type of house is the traditional *mudhif*, that is "guest house" which is a familiar part of every village in southern Iraq. So, the long reeds came from Kabaish via Nasiriya. Under the direction of our able dig foreman, Khalaf Jasim, a number of these structures were erected by local villagers while Don and I continued struggling with the supply problem in Baghdad.

Our camp was located on the mound about four hundred meters from the local village and from the canal which is our main artery of transportation to the outside. We later learned that this choice was exceedingly wise not only because it removed us from the noise of the village but also from the fluctuating water level of the canal and nearby marshes. It is much easier to bring or carry water to the camp than it would be to carry the camp out of overflow water from the canal or marshes!

On November 9, 1968 we were ready to begin actual digging. Since we possessed only a tiny all-terrain vehicle whose capacity was small and whose reliability was uncertain, we could dig only in close proximity to our camp. A likely spot lay some three hundred meters to the west between our headquarters and the village. There a hole had been pointed out to us as the find spot of a stela of Ur-Nanshe which is exhibited in the Iraq Museum. While it is quite unlikely that the stela ever came from that locus, enlargement of the hole did produce at once a structure made of fired plano-convex bricks. Such bricks, of course, are an almost certain sign of an area or building of importance. Although at first it seemed to be a portion of a wall, it proved rather to be a podium more than a meter in length, about a meter in

3
View of the IB.GAL excavation after a heavy rain in January 1969. Note the balks of the ten-meter grid system.





1
Al-Hiba: IB.GAL of Enannatum.

2
Obverse of one of the foundation stones from Level I of the IB.GAL. Height, 15 cm.; Width, 16 cm.

3
The podium in Level II of the IB.GAL of Inanna.

4
Copper figurines excavated in 1970 from Level I of the IB.GAL. Heights, 21.6, 21.3 cm.

5
One of the squares in the Level I platform of the IB.GAL showing both the solid mud-brick part of the platform and the "open" portions which had been filled with clean clay.

width and about a meter in preserved height. One corner and portions of two sides were missing. The undisturbed parts were covered with many coats of mud plaster. The fired plano-convex bricks were as sound as the day they were made. Thus began the excavations in Area A.

As we enlarged upon our ten by ten meter grid system, we soon discovered that the podium was located in a Level II courtyard. On the ninth day of digging, in the mudbrick Level I platform quite near the Level II podium, we found by a great stroke of good fortune an inscribed foundation stone which names the building and its builder. Who could ask for anything more? Two days later there was more, another foundation stone, accompanied this time by a copper foundation figurine. Before the season was over we were to discover ten stones and seven figurines. The figurines were always accompanied by a stone, but the stones sometimes occurred alone.

The text on the stone (the same text, although at present illegible, is presumably on the figurines) told us that we were digging in a temple of the goddess Inanna called the IB.GAL. The builder of Level I of this temple was Enannatum I (ca. 2450 B.C.). The copper figurine was said to represent Shulutula, the personal deity of Enannatum, and as such to stand perpetually in prayer before Inanna on behalf of Enannatum.

Before long it became clear that the Inanna temple was set in a temple oval. The width of the oval was 93.0 m. Since the southern portion of the oval had eroded away, the exact original length cannot be known, but if the proportions are similar to those of the oval at Khafajah, the entire length was about 130.0 m. From the plan of Level I two points are clear at once. The platform with the IB.GAL joins the single oval wall and does not stand isolated from it with a temple on top as in the architect's reconstruction of the Khafajah complex. Furthermore, the plan of the IB.GAL platform seems to have "rooms" within its confines. In the southern portion of the platform the "rooms" are joined by what appear to be "doorways"; in the northern portion the "doorways" are lacking. In reality there are no "doorways" and no "rooms" either. While most of the platform is constructed of sun-dried plano-convex bricks, those spaces by contrast were filled with clean, dried, lumpy clay, clay which must have come from a canal or river bank. At intervals each of these spaces was covered with one horizontal layer of mudbricks and between layers of clean clay at other intervals lay a thin layer of clean sand, perhaps 5 centimeters thick. We can only speculate that the sand may have served as a barrier against moisture and salt and that the dried, lumpy clay may have aided drainage. While we do not understand the purpose or pattern of these filled "rooms" and "doorways," we suppose that if we knew the layout of the rooms of the temple which once stood on the platform, there might be a recognizable correlation. It would not appear to be a case of saving labor as in the platform for the Parthian level of the Inanna temple at Nippur, where the perimeter was constructed of mudbricks to hold the clay filling of the interior of the platform in place.

In our second season (1970-71) in Area A we proceeded to remove the Level I balks and in so doing uncovered another pair of copper figurines and four foundation stones of the same kind as

those found in 1968-69. Even after having found so many of these foundation deposits in the two seasons, no pattern of placement prevails which would enable us to predict where the next should be found. We succeeded also in delineating portions of Levels II and III, although as those who have dug in this type of situation readily understand, the plans for these levels are only partially complete. It was amazing to see how much higher the same floor was on the western side of the IB.GAL than on the eastern side. The builders certainly had not employed a mason's level!



In a limited area 3.5 x 7.0 meters, we decided to go down to virgin soil or to the water table. Based on previous experience we expected water to come first and it did, but not until we had reached Level XI. At the surface we had begun in Early Dynastic (ED) III B. In Level XI we had reached ED I. How long before Level XI, if indeed at all, we had attained ED I we do not know, because the amount of diagnostic pottery to come out of this pit was abysmally small. In fact, it was only by luck that from the very water and mud of Level XI two of our skilled pickmen dug out two short-spouted jars typical of ED I and two chalices of a form used in that period as well. So, except for this good fortune, the pit which became 3.5 meters deep before we reached water might just as well have told us nothing more than the fact that we had cut through eleven levels on our way down without any indication whatever as to how much time had elapsed. As it is, it must have been more than three hundred years (between 2800 and 2400 B.C.). While there can be no certainty as to whether Level XI was part of an earlier Inanna temple, based again on Nippur experience where an Inanna temple was traced through a series of levels from Parthian times into ED I, we have some reason to believe that Level XI was also a temple.

Except for the foundation deposits, objects from the IB.GAL were few. Even potsherds were at a premium. Areas in which temples are built and rebuilt are usually much too carefully cleaned between levels to suit archaeologists.

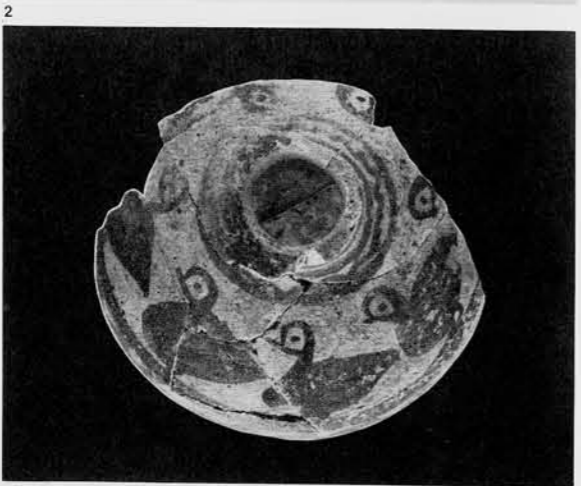
In spite of the lack of adequate transport, we did make some tests during the 1968-69 season on the high parts of the mound one and one-half miles north of our expedition headquarters. Two small trenches were abandoned because of too much overburden from the wash of erosion. In a third locus, however, which became known as Area B, we did find a nicely niched temple facade. To the left of the door of this facade stood a large stone mortar (?) (diameter, 40 centimeters; height about one meter) or, at least, a round pillar with the top hollowed out. Perhaps it even held holy water! The most significant chronological find was a cuneiform tablet bearing a date of Siniddinam, king of Larsa, ca. 1850 B.C. This tablet was one of three placed in a pot apparently as a gift for an infant burial, a burial which was perhaps partially cut by the Level III foundation of the temple.

In our second season (1970-71) we increased the size of our reed camp to accommodate an enlarged staff. Our transport capability was enhanced by the acquisition of a used Massey-Ferguson tractor and a metal wagon fabricated from used materials in the Sheikh Omar section of Baghdad. Like all things mechanical in such a location, a vehicle can be both a blessing and a curse. One blesses it when it runs and curses it when it does not. Altogether, I should say, the benefits exceeded the liabilities, because it tremendously increased the scope of the work that we were able to do.

In the first place, the tractor and wagon were available to take and to retrieve John Benczkowski, our architect, and his two rod boys to and from distant parts of the mound. During the campaign John laid out more than twenty polygons covering the whole mound and took great numbers of elevations—more than four thousand readings in all for both purposes—and by aid of a



1 Level X in test pit in Area A.



2 Tablet from Area B bearing a date of Siniddinam of Larsa, 19th century B.C. Height, ca. 10 cm.

3 Fragment of a decorated pot—probably from Iran—from Area C. Height, 13.8 cm.; Maximum Diameter, 14 cm.

comptometer made the necessary calculations which provided the data upon which he is even now preparing the contour map of the entire mound. What we hope will be permanent points were set in concrete so that we should be able to locate the loci of our present and future excavations quite exactly on the map. The way points have a tendency to disappear, however, our hopes may be no more than pious dreams. John was able to tell us that the mound is 2.28 miles long and that it is only a hair less than a mile in width. So, it seems certain that Al-Hiba is the largest Sumerian mound known.

In the second place, we were able to open a new area, Area C, about three-quarters of a mile north of our camp. At that distance, it was too far to continue on a sustained basis without motor transport. The loss of time would have been too much. Salih Abdullah's task was to drive and to keep the tractor running and it was a full-time job.

What we and many others had thought to be the site of a cemetery was the location of our Area C operation. Walls of fired bricks inclosing small rectangular areas, areas believed to be too small for rooms in a building, were visible on the surface. We originally laid out four ten by ten meter squares surrounding these small rectangular areas. Cleaning of the surface quickly dispelled the idea of a cemetery. The small rectangular areas were rooms in a building. The four squares were multiplied many times between November 7 and January 8. The few rooms

became more than ninety in number. When the season came to a close, we still had only the southeast corner of the building. The eastern wall stretched for more than sixty meters to the north, with the northeast corner still somewhere beyond. We never found the southwest corner either, but it is possible that it was destroyed by a cut. While we dug portions of the building in only Levels I and II, we know that there is at least another level and perhaps even more below.

What kind of building have we on our hands? It is not a temple. It lacks the niches which are such a characteristic feature of Sumerian temple architecture. It is not a series of private houses because, while it had service areas, it was not arranged in a fashion to have many series of a few rooms each organized around its own courtyard with access to a street. Although we are not yet prepared to prove it, a building for government administration seems likely. This we say for several reasons. First, we have inscriptional evidence for Eannatum, Enannatum I and Entemena, the third, fourth and fifth rulers in the nine-man Lagash dynasty. Our first inscription was on a sherd from a large storage jar. Since the crucial first syllable of the name was destroyed, it may belong either to Eannatum or Enannatum. An inscription on a clay sealing bears the name of Eannatum. A tablet of historical content was written for Enannatum I and mentions his opponent, Ur-Lumma of Umma. A fragmentary votive cone was made for Entemena. In addition to the

4 Remains of an arched and plastered niche which filled a blocked doorway in Area C.

5 At work in Area C. Note various kinds of digging tools.

6 Southeast corner of Area C building.

7 Clay sealing bearing the name of Eannatum. Maximum Height, 5.9 cm.



historical and votive texts already mentioned, the thirty pieces plus of cuneiform writing were devoted to economic and literary content. One records what are probably the earliest known Sumerian riddles.

Second, we recovered, cleaned, repaired, photographed and drew more than one hundred fifty discarded clay sealings which must have come from various kinds of containers. What more natural place to find such sealings than in a government administrative building.

Third, many of the rooms were unusually small and the plan and quality of construction were undistinguished. Do these qualifications not fit, at least, modern government offices?

In addition to the inscriptions and clay sealings already mentioned, this building was more productive of objects than the IB.GAL of Area A. The housekeeping here had not been so tidy. Six cylinder seals and one stamp seal were unearthed. Many miniature pots were found. In lieu of the absence of the remains of any materials in them which can be identified as cosmetics, may not such vessels, so often designated as cosmetic

containers, just as well be children's toys? Among the larger terracotta vessels are at least two burnished pieces of unusually high quality for ED III pottery. A pair of small, bird-headed, winged figurines with holes in the bottom, as if for attachment, we do not understand. There is the usual assortment of miniature clay chariot parts—wheels and bodies—and model boats and fragments of the same also in clay. There is even one die bearing the numbers 1-6 in dots on its six faces. This Early Dynastic III die thus joins other dice known from Ur, Tepe Gawra, Mohenjo-daro and any other early site where they have been found.

The best single group of objects was a hoard of copper pieces which had been wrapped in reed matting before being put into the fill of Level II below the Level I floor. This lot consisted of a copper pot with a flaring rim 30 cm. in diameter inverted over a bucket with a wide, rounded bottom and a more narrow top where the bail was attached. To the exterior of the pot were stuck by corrosion a pair of lids, 24 cm. in diameter, and an axe and an adze with heads 20 cm.



1 Seal with animal combat scene from Area C.

2 Members of 1970-71 staff loading boat on Abu Simak for trip to Al-Hiba, October 11, 1970.



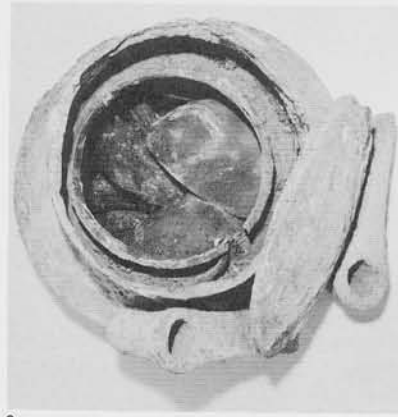
long. By removing the bottom of the inverted pot, we discovered that the bucket was closed by a pair of smaller lids like those that clung to the outside of the pot. When these were taken away, the bucket was found to be filled with a number of rather boat-shaped vessels nested the one inside of another, an axe head about half the size of the one on the outside, a pair of strainers—about a dozen pieces in all. If these pieces can be separated and restored, they will provide a good sample of Sumerian metalwork preserved well enough to show the fine shapes they represent, although their use or why they were buried as they were we shall never know.

A number of burials were encountered in Area C, both inside the building and up against the outside of the east and south walls. It is the burial just outside the south wall which is of particular interest. In it were found, deliberately buried together, the bones of a human and of an ass. Whether the bones are from a wild or domestic ass, we will not know until the bones have been studied further. For those who are particularly interested in early equids we are told that the evidence of the bones is most welcome, no matter whether they turn out to be from the wild or domestic animal.

The plan of the building, as I have said, reveals nothing of excellence. Architecturally, one of the most interesting features was the use of plano-convex and flat, rectangular bricks intermixed. While plano-convex bricks are usually cited as a hallmark of Early Dynastic architecture, they were accompanied by flat, rectangular bricks in this structure. In some places the walls of the building were preserved to a height of nearly two meters, because a tremendous fire took place in Level I. Its heat penetrated well into Level II. Walls as much as 75 centimeters thick, originally made of mudbricks, sun-dried, were sometimes fired all the way through, although, of course, not to the same intensity. The original sun-dried bricks would have eroded away, but the fire which transformed them into baked bricks is the reason for their preservation to such height, the reason that we observed walls of fired bricks inclosing small rectangles on the surface of the mound. I have never understood how such hot fires can occur in buildings which supposedly were so devoid of inflammable materials. What could there be to burn except the roof beams and the reeds and mats used in the roof and perhaps as floor and wall coverings? That would hardly seem to supply enough fuel to produce the result observed.



3 Building a *mudhit*. From the bundles of reeds planted at the sides of the structure, individual reeds are bent to form the domed roof of this "quonset"-type house. The whole will be covered with reed matting.



1
Plano-convex and flat, rectangular bricks combined in this Early Dynastic III B construction in Area C.

2
Copper hoard with bucket lids removed.

So this is how the excavations of the Wolfe Archaeological Expedition at Al-Hiba stand after two seasons. Although we have made a good beginning, we have made only a few tiny scratches on this huge tell. In fact, a hundred seasons would not begin to exhaust the possibilities for digging on Al-Hiba. Each of our seasons, however, has added something new to our knowledge of the Sumerians. The IB-GAL of Inanna, for example, is the earliest Sumerian temple dated by inscrip-

tions within its confines. The use of both plano-convex and flat, rectangular bricks together, the hoard of copper objects, and the variety of inscriptions from Area C all serve to increase our knowledge of and our respect for these peoples of early Mesopotamia. •



Vaughn E. Crawford is Curator of Ancient Near Eastern Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He received his Ph.D. degree from Yale University Graduate School in 1948 and has participated in field work at Nippur, Nimrud, Abu Salabikh and Al-Hiba in Iraq and at Hasanlu, Yarim Tepe and Ziwiye in Iran.

Staff	1968-69	1970-71
Iraqi Commissioners:	Ismail Husein Hijara Majid Mehsin Haddou	Munir Yousif Taha Fadhil Madhloum
Project Director:	Vaughn E. Crawford	Vaughn E. Crawford
Field Director:	Donald P. Hansen	Donald P. Hansen
Epigrapher:	Robert D. Biggs	Robert D. Biggs
Archaeologists:	Edward L. Ochsenschlager Florence Karasek Suzanne Meek	Edward L. Ochsenschlager Elizabeth Carter Roberta Lewis Elsie Holmes Peck
Anthropologist:		Abdullah Masry
Architect:		John Benczkowski
Conservator:		Ann Searight
Secretary-Treasurer:		Julia C. Crawford

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Credits

All photographs, Al-Hiba Expedition staff.