TITLE: *Mesopotamian City Plan for Nippur*
DATE: *1,500 B.C.*
AUTHOR: *unknown*
DESCRIPTION: This Babylonian clay tablet, drawn around 1,500 B.C. and measuring 18 x 21 cm, is incised with a plan of Nippur, the religious center of the Sumerians in Babylonia during this period. The tablet marks the principal temple of Enlil in its enclosure on the right edge, along with storehouses, a park and another enclosure, the river Euphrates, a canal to one side of the city, and another canal running through the center. A wall surrounds the city, pierced by seven gates which, like all the other features, have their names written beside them. As on some of the house plans, measurements are given for several of the structures, apparently in units of twelve *cubits* [about six meters]. Scrutiny of the map beside modern surveys of Nippur has led to the claim that it was drawn to scale. How much of the terrain around Nippur has been included cannot be known because of damage to the tablet, nor is there any statement of the plan's purpose, although repair of the city's defenses is suggested. As such, this tablet represents possibly the earliest known town plan drawn to scale.

Nippur city map drawn to scale

Examples of city maps, some quite fragmentary, are preserved for Gasur (later called Nuzi), Nippur, Babylon, Sippar, and Uruk. The ancient Mesopotamian city stands as the quintessential vehicle of self-identification in that fundamentally urban civilization. Our knowledge of a Mesopotamian conception of "citizenship" is unfortunately quite poor, but a member of the

community was identified as "one of the city," and so the equivalent expression of the term "citizen," or something perhaps similar to it, is tied to the concept and word for the city. We cannot determine the precise function of the city maps, and one hesitates to suggest the anachronistic notion that their production hints at something akin to self-representation on the social level. Even so, while perhaps not consciously self-representational, a cuneiform city map was in fact a representation of a social and topographical phenomenon that functioned not only as political and economic center but also as the residence of a god in the Sumero-Akkadian pantheon. This was the defining function of a Mesopotamian city; and so a number of identities related to community, government, and religion were in fact integral to the character of any given urban center.

In the third millennium, Nippur was the single most important religious center of all Sumerian city-states. It was the earthly residence of the god Enlil, divine ruler of the pantheon, where his temple *E-kur* [House Mountain] was built. Not only had the city and its principal temple functioned as a sacred site for cult and ritual observance, but also ideologically Nippur represented the very center of the cosmos, as is clear from its epithet *Dur-anki*, "Bond of Heaven and Underworld." In the fall of 1899, during the excavation at Nippur by the University of Pennsylvania, a 21x18 cm clay map was found. Published only in 1955, it was subsequently analyzed by Samuel Kramer and Cyrus Gordon in 1956. Scholarly consensus dates the map to the Kassite period (perhaps 14th to 13th century B.C.). This marks a time of renewed vitality for Nippur, which had been abandoned for several centuries since the Old Babylonian period (reign of Samsuiluna, 18th century B.C.).

If in fact the map was first drawn by Kassite scribes, it may indicate the reconstitution of Nippur's former glory with renewed building by Kassite kings. It represents, in the manner of house plans, the *E-kur* temple and its attached *Kiur*, associated with the underworld. These buildings are shown with double lines for walls and with parallel cross-hatches marking the positions of doorways, conventions employed in house plans. Also indicated are the *An-niginna*, a kind of enclosure, the *Es-mah* [Exalted Shrine] a city park named *Central Park*, seven gates (including the Ur-facing gate and the Uruk, Gula, and Nergal gates), and two important canals, the *Nunbirdu* (Id-nunbir-tum) at the top of the map and the *Center City Canal*, appropriately named. Many features are given measurements in a standard Sumerian unit of length, the rod, or *nindan* (= 12 cubits).

With the aid of aerial photographs, and by study of archaeological remains and comparisons with the modem site plan of Nippur, Miguel Civil determined that the Nippur map was drawn to scale; he also found its orientation to be northwest to southeast. Not only is this map matched by the modern reconstruction of the site plan, but also when we read the Sumerian literary text "Enlil and Ninlil," set in the city of Nippur, we are placed in the very topography represented on the map. The poem begins:

> There was a city, there was a city—the one we live in. Nibru was the city, the one we live in. Dur-gisnimbar was the city, the one we live in. Id-sala is its holy river, Kar-gestina is its quay. Kar-asar is its quay where boats make fast. Pu-lal is its freshwater well. Id-nunbir-tum is its branching canal, and if one measures from there, its cultivated land is 50 satreach way. Enlil was one of its young men, and Ninlil was one its young women. Nun-bar-se-gunu was one of its wise old women.

Enlil and Ninlil are described here as an adolescent boy and girl, and the girl's mother, Nunbarshegunu, is there to advise.

LOCATION: Hilprecht Collection, Friedrich-Schiller-Universitat, Jena

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