

News & Notes

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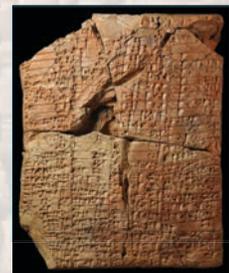
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ON THE COVER: ISACM A30276; see page 11



MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



I am pleased to be writing to you as the Institute for the Study of Ancient Culture's (ISAC's) new director. I am honored to return to the Institute, where I completed my doctoral studies in 1995, almost thirty years ago. It is a particularly exciting moment to be joining ISAC. At a time when the importance of humanistic scholarship is increasingly questioned and marginalized, the Institute's unwavering commitment to pioneering, foundational research and interdisciplinary scholarship that contributes deep understanding to issues of pressing global concern, whether they be climate and the environment or profoundly complex social issues such as inequality and conflict, is both invigorating and immensely significant.

Earlier this year, we welcomed Marc Maillot as the associate director and chief curator of the ISAC Museum, and in September, Sheheryar Hasnain took up the critical leadership post of associate director of administration and finance vacated by Brendan Bulger. We also welcomed two new faculty members, Sumerologist Jana Matuszak and Egyptologist Margaret Geoga, and in January we will welcome Derek Kennet, who will be joining ISAC as the inaugural Howard E. Hallengren Professor of Arabian Peninsula and Gulf States Archaeology. Two further faculty searches, in Egyptian archaeology and ancient Near Eastern art, are currently also underway. The fall also witnessed other important transitions, most notably the retirement of Theo van den Hout, the Arthur and Joann Rasmussen Professor of Hittite and Anatolian Languages. The Institute's new name, the renewal of its faculty, and the addition of new staff reflect the remarkable transformation underway at ISAC, and speak to the University's continuing commitment to ISAC and its historic mission.

This issue of *News & Notes* features the current ISAC special exhibition *Back to School in Babylonia*, which highlights the (re)discovery and exploration of a scribal school, dating to the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000-1595 BCE), at Nippur, first uncovered in 1951-52 during the Institute's long-running excavations at the site. As Prof. Susanne Paulus and her team brilliantly describe and illustrate, the experience of students learning to read and write Akkadian almost four thousand years ago resonates deeply with our modern experience. The visual and tactile connection to exercise tablets that preserve the learning efforts of scribal students from a distant past, the smudges of their fingers, their corrections, even teeth marks (frustration?), powerfully convey this quintessentially human experience. The materiality of these documents also illustrates their value as pedagogical tools, and the importance of context. The excitement and interest the exhibit has generated, especially among students (of all ages), further highlights the importance and relevance of the scholarship (research and teaching) we do at ISAC. As Carter Rote and Jane Gordon further demonstrate in their articles, the Old Babylonian "school" at Nippur accentuates the enduring and fundamentally human quality that is learning and the pursuit of knowledge.

I am deeply grateful for the generous support provided by our members, donors, and partners, which makes possible the groundbreaking scholarship reflected in the *Back to School in Babylonia* exhibition and undergirds all of our work toward our mission to enhance scholarly understanding and public awareness of the places, peoples, and heritages we study. May you all enjoy a peaceful and restorative holiday season.

TIMOTHY HARRISON
Director

ISAC Tours: Central Asia with Gil Stein

June 2024, exact dates and itinerary coming soon

Travel on the Silk Road through Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan as we explore the crafts and foods along this monumental trade route. Stop by the Silk Road's most renowned oases and marvel at monumental architecture and decorative arts. Tour leader Gil Stein will guide you through the region with a unique look at current ISAC cultural heritage initiatives.

For more information, and to be placed on the tour list, please contact Matt Welton at mwelton@uchicago.edu.



CELEBRATING THE RETIREMENT OF THEO VAN DEN HOUT

by Emily Smith

On October 12, family, friends, and colleagues gathered in the ISAC Museum to celebrate Prof. Theo van den Hout's retirement. Theo joined the University of Chicago and the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations community as a professor of Hittitology in 2000. In his time here, he has played an integral role in training countless students—including myself—in Hittite and Anatolian languages, literature, art, and culture. Theo was my first Hittite instructor when I came to the University of Chicago as a PhD student in Hittitology, having been introduced to Hittite only a year earlier. To say I had no idea what I was getting myself into would be a drastic understatement. From my first day of Elementary Hittite 1, Theo has been a role model both for his excellent scholarship and for his encouraging

attitude toward others.

Theo's impact on the field and the University was evident at his retirement party, where colleagues, students, volunteers, and ISAC Advisory Council members shared their stories of working with Theo and their gratitude for the time, knowledge, and humor he has devoted to ISAC. They also presented Theo with several gifts, including an Eataly gift card, a model of a Hittite stamp seal, and a poster depicting Theo with the Hittite deity Sharruma, based on a Hittite rock inscription from the site of Yazılıkaya.

Although Theo is stepping down from teaching and from his role as interim director of ISAC, he will continue as chief editor of the Chicago Hittite Dictionary, a job he is looking forward to having more time for.



BREASTED SALON CALENDAR 2024

Wednesday, February 21 | Timothy Harrison

Director, Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures; Professor of Near Eastern Archaeology, University of Chicago

Wednesday, March 20 | Felipe Rojas Silva

Associate Professor of Archaeology and the Ancient World & Egyptology and Assyriology, Brown University

Wednesday, May 15 | Theo van den Hout

Arthur and Joann Rasmussen Professor Emeritus of Hittite and Anatolian Languages, University of Chicago; Executive Editor, Chicago Hittite Dictionary Project

Wednesday, July 17 | Naomi Harris

PhD Student, Hittite, University of Chicago

Space is limited—please register in advance!

Questions? Contact Bill Cosper: bcosper@uchicago.edu

AN INTERVIEW WITH NEW DIRECTOR TIMOTHY PAUL HARRISON

by Shirlee Hoffman

Timothy Paul Harrison began his tenure as director of the University of Chicago's Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures—West Asia & North Africa (ISAC) on September 1, 2023. A renowned academic leader and scholar with decades of research experience in the Middle East, he previously served two terms as president and past president of the American Society of Overseas Research and two terms as chair of the University of Toronto's Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations.

Having earned a PhD and a master's degree from UChicago's Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations (NELC) and a bachelor's degree from Wheaton College, his new position is, in a way, a homecoming for him.

You have previously served in several academic leadership positions. Did you ever imagine that being director of ISAC might one day be in your future?

I certainly dreamed of being a professor of Near Eastern archaeology at the Institute when I was a student, but I don't know that I had the confidence to imagine ever becoming the director, and in more recent years, my professional commitments and responsibilities made such a possibility increasingly remote and unlikely.

How do you expect your work with ISAC's "exceptional community of scholars" will support you in furthering your research on the rise of early society complexity in the ancient Near East, perhaps beyond your current focus on the Bronze and Iron Age in the Levant?

I am certain that the incredible disciplinary scope and caliber of the scholarship at ISAC will greatly enrich and expand my intellectual world, and that of my own ongoing research. Indeed, this is already happening as I meet with colleagues and learn more about their research. This is truly one of the great benefits and privileges of being director: the opportunity to encounter new worlds of knowledge and learning as I venture throughout the building.

In addition to being director of ISAC, we see that you will also be serving as a professor in NELC and the College. Looking ahead, what might be the courses you will be offering?

I will have a reduced teaching load, due to my directorship responsibilities, but I am planning to teach a graduate seminar on the archaeology of the Bronze and Iron Age Levant/eastern Mediterranean, focusing on an evolving range of topics or themes (e.g., early urbanism and state formation, craft production, social organization and domestic or "household" archaeology, and the role of religion in the life of ancient communities). I am also interested in teaching an

undergraduate course on cultural heritage and conflict in the Middle East, and I look forward to contributing to the Common Core curriculum in the College.

Please tell us about the Computational Research on the Ancient Near East project launched in December 2020. We see that it is a "global research collaboration that aims to cultivate and analyze archaeological data." Can you give us a brief description of one or two of its current projects and the associated challenges and, if possible, current results? Also, are you planning to continue your involvement in the coming years?

The CRANE Project (<https://bit.ly/CraneProj>) is an international interdisciplinary research collaboration comprised of archaeologists, historians, climate scientists, paleo-environmental specialists, and computer scientists that seeks to draw on the vast and rich repository of knowledge produced by over a century and a half of field research and exploration in the Middle East to provide deepened insight into issues of contemporary concern, ranging from climate change to deeply rooted social issues such as inequality and conflict. One such CRANE project has involved a collaboration between archaeologists and a team of climate scientists building a high-resolution regional climate model for the Eastern Mediterranean that can introduce high temporal and spatial resolution to the study of changing climatic and environmental conditions in the region over the course of the Holocene. Working on powerful supercomputers, the climate scientists are able to build climate models with increasingly finer resolution, but they depend on historical data to test, or "ground truth," their models, data that CRANE researchers are able to provide. The CRANE Project is nearing the end of its second phase (CRANE 2.0), and consultations are underway to launch a third phase of the project.

As for my involvement, I am the CRANE project director and will continue my involvement in and leadership of the project. ISAC's David Schloen is a CRANE coinvestigator; he and ISAC/UChicago have been a CRANE institutional partner, involved in the project from its conception.

What about field work? Do you plan to continue leading the Tayinat Archaeological Project in southeastern Turkey? If not, do you anticipate being able to participate in any on-site excavating?

I am actively involved in a number of long-running field projects, including the Tayinat Archaeological Project, which has a direct connection to excavations conducted by the Institute back in the 1930s as part of the Syrian-Hittite Expedition, and I very much plan to continue these projects.

However, I will need to step back from the "day-to-day" running of them and hand these responsibilities over to colleagues. We have great teams in place, but I expect that stepping back and letting others take more direct leadership in these projects will be more than a little challenging for me.

Not being a stranger to Chicago, can you share any thoughts you've had about how to leverage your local knowledge and connections to attract more visitors to the ISAC Museum and create opportunities to convey the richness and value of the ancient Near East to a wider audience?

I believe the study of the ancient world, and the rich collections and knowledge the Institute has played a foundational role in discovering, are profoundly relevant and important to the broader public today, indeed, more than ever. Community engagement thus must be at the core of our mission, and in my experience, the most effective way to engage the local community is through friendship and outreach, building relationships with both institutions and individuals. I believe the Institute has made great strides in this regard since my student days decades ago, but we must continue to build these relationships and work to continue embedding the Institute in the life of our local communities.

What have you missed most about Chicago from your student days? Now that you once again are living here, what are you most looking forward to revisiting in the

Chicagoland area, and perhaps in the nearby Midwestern states?

Returning to Hyde Park has been a very happy homecoming. My wife, Leann, and I have enjoyed going for walks through our neighborhood and biking along the lakefront, attending community events (such as the Taste of Chicago), and visiting local museums (the DuSable) and old familiar food haunts (the Medici and Harold's Chicken Shack).

You were quite active in local grammar school outreach during your student days at ISAC (then the OI). Do you have any pointers to offer to docents as they prepare to engage with our local community?

I don't know that I can add anything that docents don't already know, but certainly I have found that communicating a sense of excitement and wonder or awe about the incredible richness and diversity of the lived experience of ancient communities and the ancient world has always engaged the imagination of students and audiences.

Finally, what can the ISAC community—faculty, staff, members, volunteers—do (or not do) to best support you during your tenure?

I have felt warmly welcomed by the ISAC community. I hope everyone will continue to feel welcome approaching me. I would love to hear from each of you, whether daily greetings or on any subject of concern, positive or negative. Please know that my door is open to all.



In our last issue, we featured a photo collage of ISAC's name change celebration. We neglected to give credit to the photographer, Charissa Johnson at Charissa Johnson Photography. We thought we would highlight her work with a couple more images from the celebration. To view more of Charissa's work, please visit <https://www.charissajohnsonphotography.com>.



ISAC MONTHLY LECTURES

This fall, we kicked off our 2023–24 ISAC lecture series with four events that explored themes featured in our latest special exhibition, *Back to School in Babylonia*.

Join us at 7:00 p.m. (Central) on the first Wednesday of each month for the remainder of the 2023–24 academic year as we explore the latest ISAC fieldwork in Spain, developments in the translation of the Meroitic language, and magic and ritual in the ancient world.

February 7 | Carolina López-Ruiz, University of Chicago

Revisit the Phoenicians in Iberia and celebrate ISAC's participation in the Málaga Project as we welcome Carolina López-Ruiz, professor of ancient Mediterranean religions and mythology in the UChicago Divinity School and Department of Classics. López-Ruiz's research centers around comparative mythology and cultural exchange in the ancient Mediterranean, exploring the idea that mythological narratives and religious practices act as loci for cultural exchange and provide mechanisms for groups in close contact to negotiate tensions, adapt to change, and bolster their resilience.

March 6 | Claude Rilly, Sorbonne University

We are excited to welcome Claude Rilly, one of the world's foremost scholars in Meroitic writing, for a lecture that approaches the translation of this ancient language from Sudan. Early in his career, Rilly demonstrated that Meroitic belonged to a specific linguistic family, settling a question debated for more than a century. Join us for a lecture that will borrow from Rilly's career as the director of the French Archaeological Unit in Khartoum and the head of the archaeological mission in Sedeinga, Sudanese Nubia.

April 3 | Jeffrey Stackert, University of Chicago

ISAC welcomes UChicago's Jeffrey Stackert, professor of Hebrew Bible, for a lecture titled "Judah in the Shadow of the Assyrian Empire." A biblical scholar who situates the Hebrew Bible in the context of the larger ancient Near East, Stackert's research focuses on the composition of the Pentateuch, ancient Near Eastern prophecy, cultic text, and ancient Near Eastern law. His first book, *Rewriting the Torah: Literary Revision in Deuteronomy and the Holiness Legislation*, received the 2010 John Templeton Award for Theological Promise.

May 8* | Korshi Dosoo

*second (not first) Wednesday of the month

Join us as we welcome Korshi Dosoo, leader of the project "The Coptic Magical Papyri: Vernacular Religion in Late Antique and Early Islamic Egypt" at the Julius Maximilian University of Würzburg. Dosoo will present the lecture "Christian Egypt and Its Pagan Past: Perspectives on Pharaonic Civilization from Coptic Magic." Dosoo's research focuses on magical and lived religion in Egypt from the Ptolemaic to the Mamluk periods as revealed by papyrological and epigraphic sources.

June 5 | Daniel Schwemer

We end our 2023–24 lecture series with a visit by a second scholar from the Julius Maximilian University of Würzburg, Daniel Schwemer, professor and chair of ancient Near Eastern studies and research associate of the School of Oriental and African Studies. Schwemer's research interests include Akkadian, Hittitology, the history of religion in the ancient Near East, ancient Near Eastern magic and medicine, and ritual. Schwemer's published works include the three-part *Corpus of Mesopotamian Anti-witchcraft Rituals*.

Each of these lectures will be streamed live on ISAC's YouTube channel exclusively for ISAC members. Every month you will receive a members' e-mail with a link. If you miss the livestream, an edited version of each lecture will be posted to our YouTube channel in the weeks that follow.



BACK TO SCHOOL IN BABYLONIA

A STUDENT AND THEIR TABLET

by Susanne Paulus

When you hold the clay tablet with the unassuming number ISACM A30276 (fig. 1) in your hands, you notice right away how heavy it feels compared with the much smaller inscribed objects you usually handle—it feels important, but you can't help but wonder how someone could have worked on it without the hand that held it going numb over time. Your eye then moves to the left: the practiced hand of a teacher has quickly written a multiplication table for the number 432. Reading the numbers, you struggle a bit, for they are written in the Babylonian sexagesimal system as $7 (\times 60) 12$: $432 \times 1 = 432$; $\times 2 = 14\ 24$ (or 864); $\times 3 = 21\ 36$ (or 1,296); $\times 4 = 28\ 48$ (or 1,728); $\times 5 = 36$ (or 2,160). Perhaps these calculations are easy for you, or perhaps you struggled with multiplication in school like I did.

Our Babylonian student had to practice this pattern in the space on the tablet to the right of the teacher's example. If you look closely, you can see that the tablet is thinner on that side. Each time the student wrote down the numbers in the hope of finally memorizing them, they erased the numbers afterward by dragging their fingers over the clay and using the small vessel at their side to keep it moist and suitable for writing. After the final round, they erased it once more—after all, the pattern was by then safely stored in their mind. When you put your own hand in the lines left by the student's fingers—using the 3D-printed copy on display in the exhibition *Back to School in Babylonia*—you can still see and trace those marks. Probably your hand is larger than the schoolchild's who wrote the tablet.

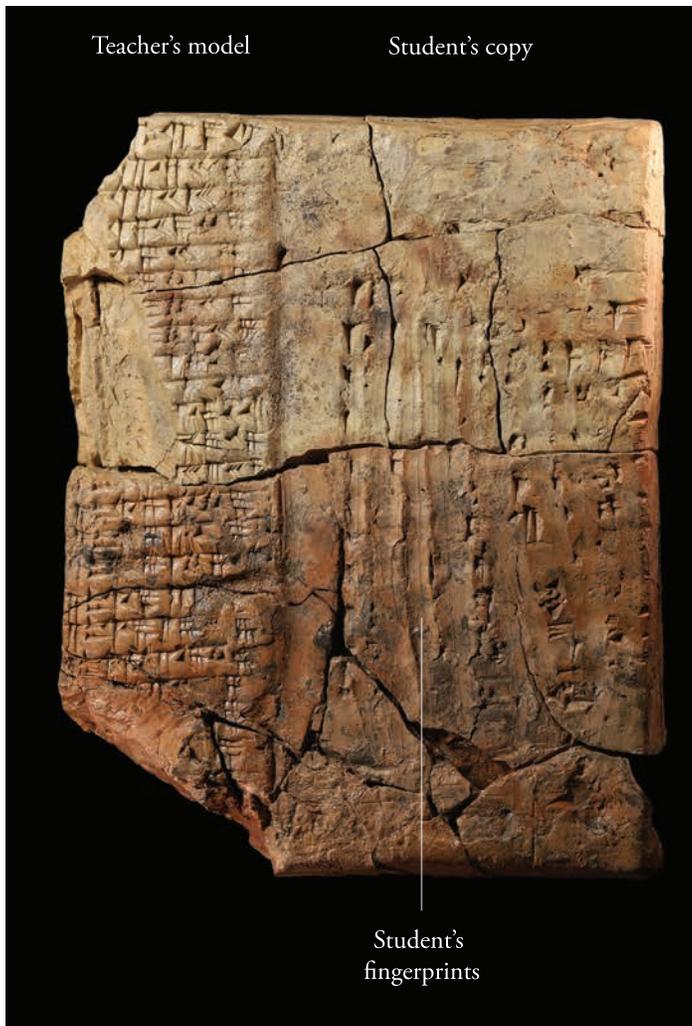


Figure 1. Obverse (front side) of ISACM A30276. Photo by Danielle Levy. Annotations by Marta Díaz Herrera.

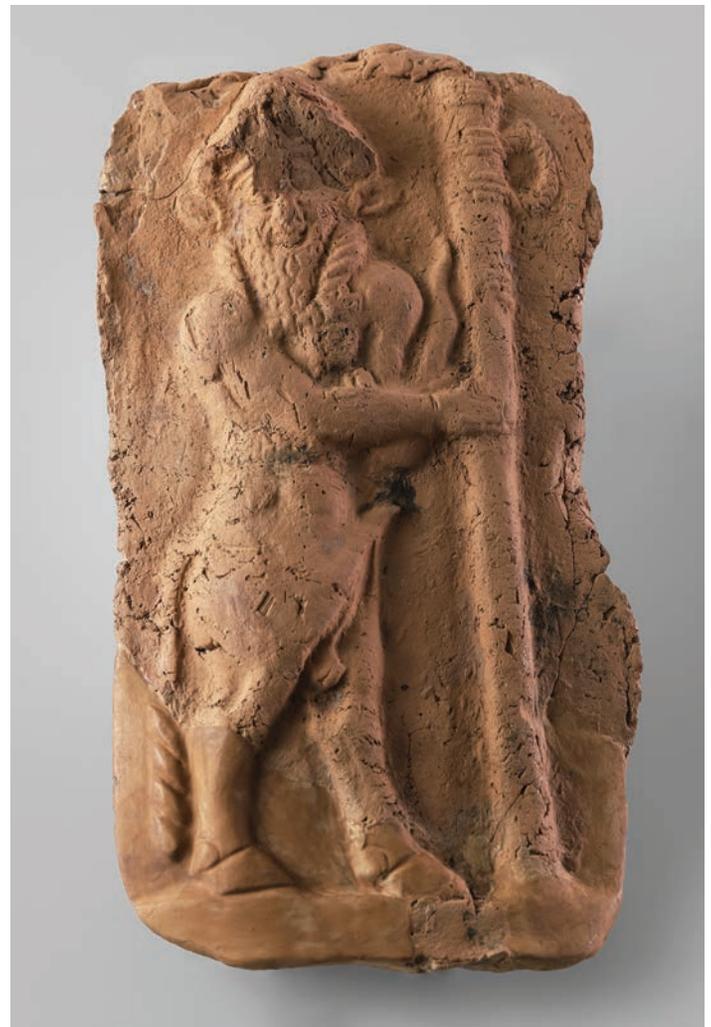


Figure 2. Clay plaque of a bull-man or *kusarikku* found in House K. ISACM 29440. Photo by Danielle Levy.

Who were they, these ancient students? If you could ask them, they would proudly tell you their names and those of their fathers—important scribes, priests, and administrators in Nibru, or Nippur as we call it today. They would tell you that their city is home to the most prominent god, Enlil “the Great Mountain,” and likely point out his temple in the background—the Ekur, with its enormous Duranki (the name of the ziggurat, or temple tower) connecting heaven and earth. The more senior students could tell you many myths surrounding the head of the Babylonian pantheon, explaining his importance for all Sumer and Akkad (i.e., Babylonia). As for the current king, they would point to Samsu-iluna in Babylon (1749–1712 BCE), who reigned over the land at the time. In school, the students learned about the tumultuous history of Nippur, whose rule had changed multiple times between the kings of Isin, Larsa, and finally Babylon during the previous two centuries. These students preserved the kings’ names and achievements—some more credible than others—by writing out their hymns.

The names of most of the ancient students, along with information about their identities, such as their families, ages, and genders, are lost to us. We assume that most of the students lived in the immediate neighborhood of the school—their homes were partially excavated by the Joint Expedition to Nippur of the University of Chicago and University of Pennsylvania in 1951–52. Some objects from their houses, such as the beautiful clay plaque depicting a mythical bull-man (fig. 2), found their way into the exhibition *Back to School in Babylonia*. The legal records left by the neighborhood inhabitants tell us more about the social status of the students’ parents, who were members of the local elite with connections to the many temples in Nippur. Fathers who were scribes likely taught their own children or sent them to scribal school.

Scholars still debate when children started school. Some, influenced by our own system, favor an early starting age of five or six, while others believe that students started school at age ten or eleven—an interpretation based on the analysis of dental records left by a bored student biting into an exercise tablet! Leaving the tricky question of age aside, the gender of the students is an equally fraught point for the modern scholar. We do not know the gender of the individual students who wrote our tablets, and the word “schoolchild” is gender-neutral in the language of the scribal school: Sumerian. Scholars also know that some women, such as certain *naditum*-priestesses in Nippur, were literate and educated. But we cannot overlook the facts that Babylonian society was patriarchal at its core and the scribal schools in Nippur were places where masculinity was constructed and celebrated. I have little doubt, for instance, that the teacher who wrote the satirical story of a day in the life of a schoolchild was imagining a boy rather than a girl as the protagonist.

But let’s return to our student practicing multiplication. What would a typical school day look like for pupils like this one? Likely, they rose early in the morning and had a quick breakfast before heading off to school—to avoid harsh punishment, they had to be on time. Luckily, the school was only a few houses away. They entered the school through a narrow, probably arched entryway into a small courtyard that was still cool in the morning (fig. 3). They greeted their teacher, the “father of the school,” and fellow students, then sat down, and instruction began. The schoolhouse was small, like an

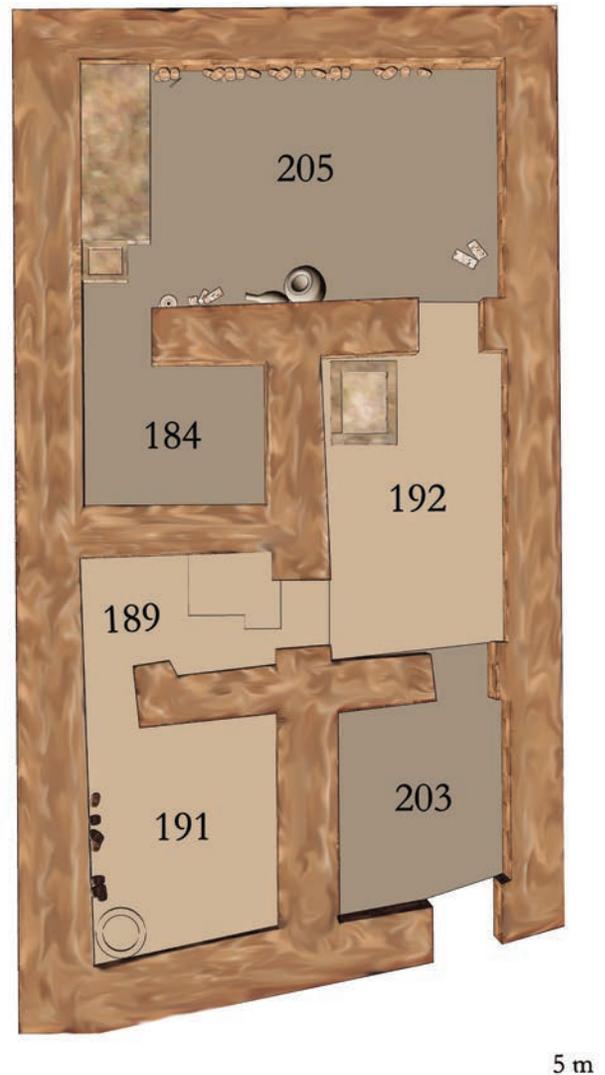
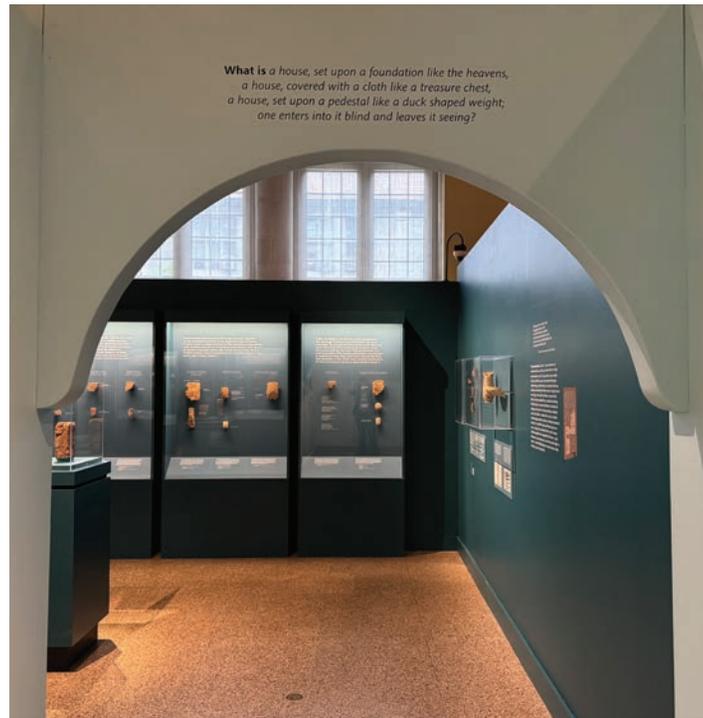


Figure 3. 3D-model top plan of House F in Level XI Floor 1. Created by Madeline Ouimet based on the excavation plans published by Donald E. McCown and Richard C. Haines, *Nippur I: Temple of Enlil, Scribal Quarter, and Soundings* (University of Chicago Press, 1967) and related data.

ordinary home, allowing for only a handful of pupils at a time, while the teacher and his family likely resided in the same building. Indeed, our student could smell fresh bread baking in the kitchen oven when starting the first task of the day: preparing the tablet that the teacher would later inscribe with the multiplication exercise. After getting permission, the student took clay from a box integrated into the courtyard’s architecture and started shaping the large tablet by flattening and folding sheets of clay and defining the edges. Making such a large tablet was challenging, but our student succeeded, and the teacher was doubtless pleased when he wrote the multiplication exercise for morning practice. After a short lunch break, students moved into the large schoolroom in the back of the house, where they sat on a bench constructed with recycled tablets and continued their work.

The texts, excavated architecture, and objects all allow us to reconstruct school life in Babylonia. When planning the exhibition, we integrated as many of these elements as possible into its design. The entire special exhibition space of the ISAC Museum (fig. 4) became the schoolhouse—or House F, as the archaeologists called it—since the gallery’s size only slightly exceeds the house’s actual dimensions. You enter the building through an archway, and light conditions change from the bright daylight outside to the dark, cool interior of a Babylonian house. The exhibition’s walls are strategically placed to mimic the rooms in House F; however, space was much tighter in the original house than modern museum design allows. Keep your eyes open for some of the installations, such as the box for tablet-making that our student used or the bench students sat on during the afternoon. The school walls were decorated with clay plaques, such as the one depicting a striding, majestic lion you may discover in a corner of the exhibit. Here, most cuneiform tablets are displayed vertically on the walls, though we are uncertain whether in antiquity they were stored on shelves built into the walls, as we know was the case in other archives and libraries in Babylonia. Most of the tablets with school exercises were not treasured items; some of them were quickly deposited in the clay box for recycling into new tablets, and others were discarded or used as building materials for walls and installations in the school. This part of the story is also visible on the tablets themselves: if you look closely, you can see that our pupil’s practice tablet broke into many parts when it was discarded sometime after completion—but let’s allow our student to finish it first.



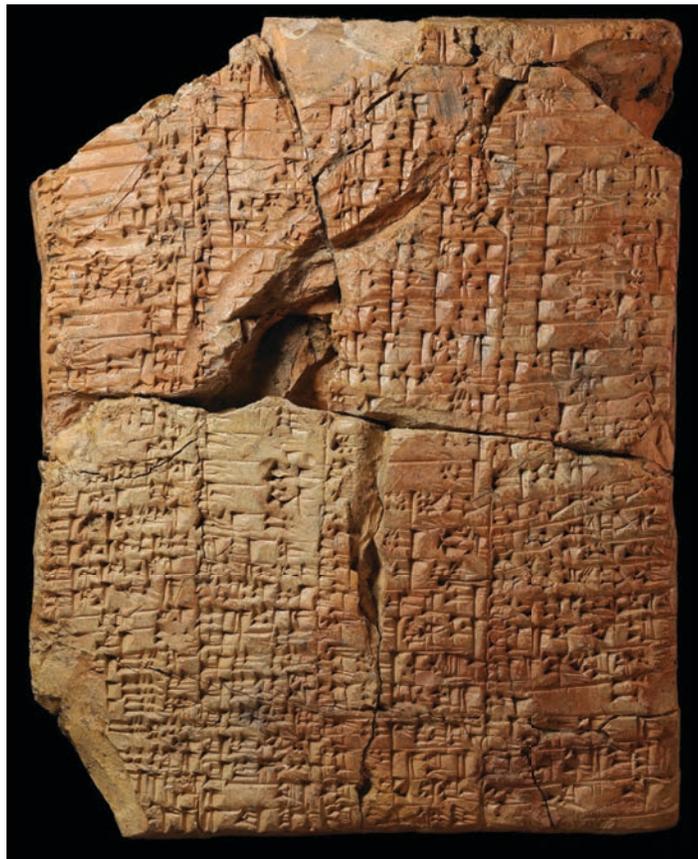
ABOVE AND BELOW: Figure 4. Installation of the *Back to School in Babylonia* exhibition. Photos by Susanne Paulus.



Our student's afternoon task consisted of inscribing the tablet's reverse. Flipping the tablet vertically and dividing it into four columns, the student started writing a long list of words committed to memory over the past weeks (fig. 5): "man"—"king"—"status of the crown prince"—"minister"—"vizier"—"minister of the inner household"—and more. All these words were written with unique signs in Sumerian, the language of instruction at the school. When introducing the list, the teacher would have given explanations in Akkadian, the native tongue of our student, who now knew the signs and their readings by heart and could work swiftly through the exercise. After a while, all 126 entries were written down; however, you may notice that some of the columns came out a bit crooked. And upon the tablet's presentation to the teacher, he complained, "Your hand(writing) is not good at all!" and set out to flog the student. But at that very moment he was interrupted by a dispute that arose between two senior students. One challenged the other: "Do you know the calculation of multiplications, reciprocals, accounts, as well as volumes? The rote recitations of the scribal school—let's recite them! I know them better than you. Come on, position yourself as my rival! I will put an end to your insults!" The opponent answered: "Idiot! Obtuse! Obstinate!" Our student feared the worst, for correct etiquette and behavior were highly encouraged in school, and any deviation could result in a hefty flogging. Surprisingly, the teacher was pleased. He praised the students for speaking Sumerian perfectly and forgot about the flogging.

Oral instruction and conversations between teachers and students are lost to us because only material evidence dominated by written sources survives from the Babylonian school, while the oral and interpersonal components of instruction are not preserved. (Imagine reconstructing modern education solely from exercises and textbooks.) So we know the different types of lexical lists with thousands of individual entries students had to memorize, but we do not know the individual explanations the teacher gave for each entry. Oral instructions were essential, as students were schooled in the traditional but dead language, Sumerian, and not in the vernacular of the time—Akkadian or Babylonian, which students spoke at home. Although in this period there were no native speakers of Sumerian, the language was still preferred for literature, inscriptions, religious texts, and legal documents; the latter were limited regionally to certain traditional parts of Babylonia, such as Nippur. Contemporary texts of daily life, such as letters, were composed in Akkadian, which played a minor role in education. At school, teachers punished students for speaking Akkadian, while the latter possibly learned to speak Sumerian using disputes such as the one quoted above. Though for obvious reasons we have no audio recordings of a Babylonian teacher, we did record two disputes for the exhibition that allow you to eavesdrop on the voices of the Babylonian school. For our student who was just practicing mathematics, skills for debating in Sumerian would develop later, over time.

At the end of the school day, the teacher gave our student some homework: a small, rectangular tablet inscribed with a Sumerian proverb and a calculation exercise (fig. 6)—exciting, because writing proverbs or small sayings in Sumerian meant the student had finally reached the end of the first phase of education! After writing many



TOP: Figure 5. Reverse of ISACM A30276. Photo by Danielle Levy.

BOTTOM: Figure 6. Obverse and reverse of ISACM A29985. Photos by Danielle Levy.

lists to learn all the cuneiform signs and their readings, practice vocabulary, and master the most obscure meanings of complex signs in Sumerian, our student was now practicing not only mathematics but also short sentences in Sumerian by writing legal documents and proverbs. Having reached this stage meant that the scribe-to-be would soon start working on the first ten literary compositions studied in school and discover songs of ancient kings, hymns to goddesses and temples, and fantastic stories, such as those of Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu fighting the guardian of the cedar forest, Huwawa. Or, as the teacher would have explained it, the student's knowledge of signs would be put to the test by entering deeper into the complex world of the scribal art. Without paying much attention, the student copied the teacher's signs for the proverb and then attempted the calculation. The challenge was to calculate the reciprocal of the number 17 46 40—but while remembering the solution, part of the technique used to reach it escaped our pupil, who, after a while, just gave up, wrote down the solution, and underlined it twice. Work done! Upon examining the tablet after his child finally got home, our student's father read the proverb the teacher had drafted: "A chattering scribe's guilt is great!" Once more, the teacher had included a lesson in behavior (unwarranted though it was, in this case).

From the homework tablet, we can deduce that students studied mathematics and proverbs at the same time. Using many exercises like those written by our student, scholars have gained a good understanding of the Babylonian curriculum in Nippur, including the compositions taught and their sequence. Schoolchildren started with basic exercises, learning to write syllables and their names, then tackled lexical lists before working on mathematics and easy sentences, as our pupil did. Afterward, they were introduced to the rich world of Sumerian literature and learned about their history, religion, laws and regulations, rhetoric, and much more. The teach-

ers also did their best to form the students' characters and transform them into good human beings or exemplary members of the scribal community. In the exhibition, we invite you to follow the path of a young student from first holding a stylus through writing literature in a neat hand toward the end of the educational curriculum, when nearing graduation—though official ceremonies are not attested.

What became of the "graduates" of the scribal school? Part of the long list of professions on the reverse of the aforementioned tablet of our student included the many professional options for scribes: they worked as administrators in palaces, temples, and local towns; they were priests and musicians; and they wrote not only letters for illiterate folks but also inscriptions and hymns for kings. Perhaps our student "followed in father's footsteps" by becoming a temple administrator who kept records for incoming and outgoing goods, daily offerings, expenses for temple personnel, and so on, or possibly trained as a lamentation priest after school and learned to appease the angry gods. Wherever our and other students went, they likely still had a bit to learn. While the teacher boasted of teaching "the totality of scribal art," in reality much practical knowledge, such as writing and balancing an account or composing a lamentation, was not covered in the Nippur curriculum—which was, however, a solid basis for any profession.

I hope you have the chance to visit *Back to School in Babylonia* to see tablet ISACM A30276 and remember some of the endeavors of our anonymous student. While not all events described here may have happened to this particular pupil, this reconstruction is based on seventy years of scholarship on House F, and I am indebted to my colleagues worldwide for their work. Many of them have written essays for our exhibition catalog, which is freely downloadable in PDF format, with print copies available for purchase, at <https://bit.ly/BacktoSchoolBook>.

Explore scribal careers in Carter Rote's essay in this issue, "Scribal Careers and Specialized Training in the Old Babylonian Period."

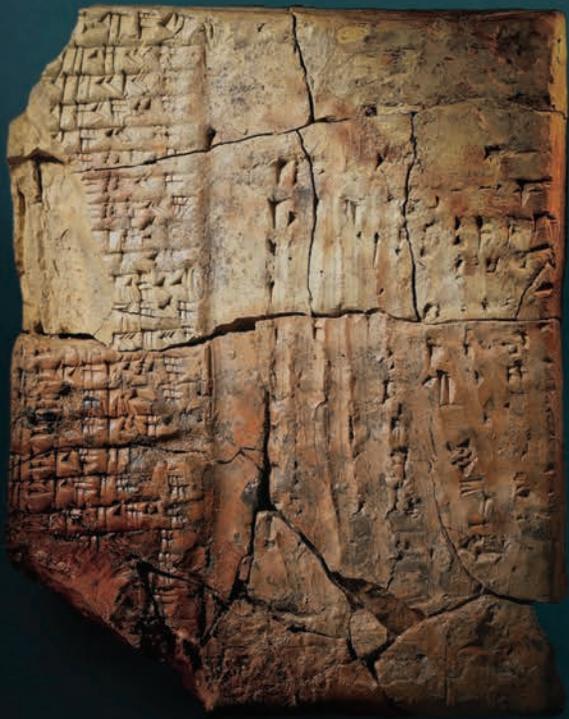
Read more about tablets from the scribal school in Jane Gordon's essay, "Tablets from House F as 'Snapshots' of Scribal Identity and School Life."

IN THE NEXT ISSUE . . .

Learn more about the *nadītum*-priestesses in Danielle Levy's article, "Women, Gender, and Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia: The View from House F."

Discover what Babylonian students knew about their history, and why, by reading Ryan D. Winter's "History Begins at Sumer—or Does It? On the Emergence of a Historical Consciousness in Early Mesopotamia."

Get to know how lexical lists helped decipher cuneiform with Marta Díaz Herrera's essay, "The Decipherment of Cuneiform Writing and the Contribution of Lexical Lists."



BACK TO SCHOOL IN BABYLONIA

A SPECIAL EXHIBIT

SEPTEMBER 21, 2023 - MARCH 24, 2024



Back to School in Babylonia is on display at the ISAC Museum from September 21, 2023, to March 24, 2024. This special exhibition has been curated by Susanne Paulus, with Marta Díaz Herrera, Jane Gordon, Danielle Levy, Madeline Ouimet, Colton G. Siegmund, and Ryan D. Winters and with support from Pallas Eible Hargro, C Mikhail, Carter Rote, and Sarah M. Ware. The exhibition reunites objects excavated at Nippur and now held in the ISAC Tablet Collection, the ISAC Museum, and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Tablets in the Iraq Museum, Baghdad, are represented by plaster casts.

SCRIBAL CAREERS AND SPECIALIZED TRAINING IN THE OLD BABYLONIAN PERIOD

by Carter Rote

Scribes are omnipresent in our conception of Mesopotamia. This statement is especially true for the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000–1595 BCE) in what is now southern Iraq. Scribes worked in a multitude of professions, and the vast majority of written sources that survive from this period were produced by scribes in various contexts. What “scribes” did in ancient Babylonia would not be clear if a modern person relied solely on dictionary entries to gain an understanding. For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a scribe as “a person who copies or transcribes manuscripts, esp. one employed as a copyist in ancient or medieval times. Now chiefly historical.” Rather than being mere copyists, scribes in Babylonia had careers as civil servants, administrators, jurists, teachers, military officials, or priests and priestesses (fig. 1). Scribes were involved in most aspects of governance, the economy, and religion, as they were essential in both day-to-day functions and the transmission of cultural and religious traditions. However, we have imperfect evidence regarding the roles of many scribes, and there are still things we do not yet understand about how they received technical training for their jobs. This essay explores two important potential careers for scribes during the Old Babylonian period—the *mu'irrum* and the *šassukkum*—and examines how aspects of the curriculum found at the Edubba'a in Nippur would or would not have prepared them for their professional careers.

The Old Babylonian period marked the true death of Sumerian as a spoken language; it flourished during the third millennium in Mesopotamia and was the first language written with the cuneiform script. During the early second millennium, Akkadian succeeded Sumerian as the *lingua franca* of the region. Akkadian, a Semitic language also written using the cuneiform script, was the common tongue in Babylonia and was used to compose royal inscriptions, letters, and other common documents, such as receipts. For this reason, it may be surprising to learn that scribes were first taught to read and write in Sumerian, not Akkadian. Scholastic texts in Sumerian have been found in different contexts across Babylonia, in cities such as Sippar, Ur, and Mari. However, the largest concentration of didactic materials from the Old Babylonian period was found at House F in Nippur's Scribal Quarter. This structure, which is much like a regular house in appearance, was a schoolhouse, or Edubba'a, meaning “the house where tablets are distributed.” More than 1,400 tablets found in the schoolhouse were excavated in 1951–52 by the Joint Expedition to Nippur of the Oriental Institute (now Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, or ISAC) and the University of Pennsylvania. These documents, many of which are now on display at ISAC as part of the special exhibition *Back to School in Babylonia*, have been used to reconstruct the curriculum that was taught to

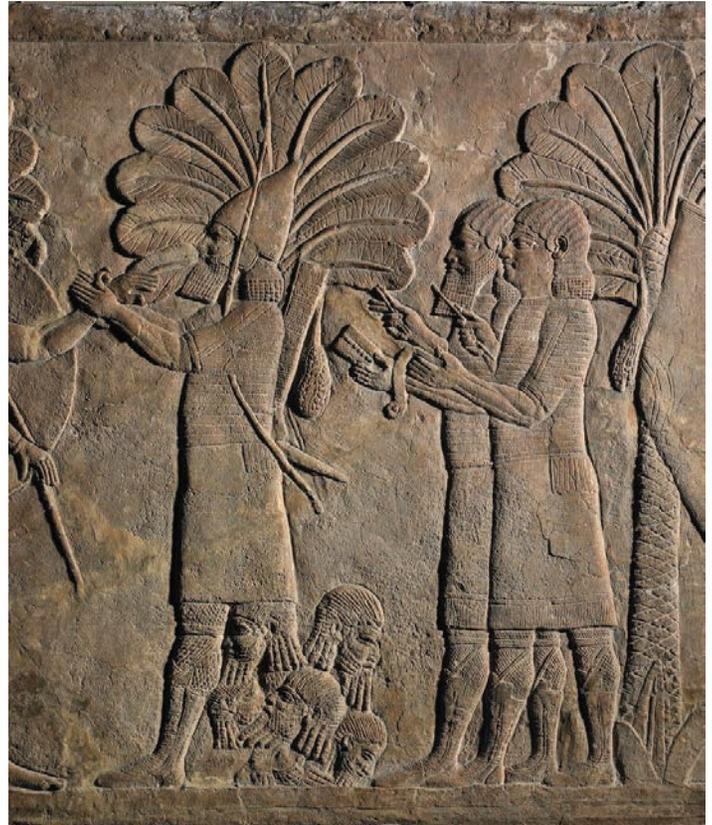


Figure 1. Neo-Assyrian scribes (Nineveh/Sennacherib). Photo courtesy of the British Museum.

scribal students in Nippur. As students completed their assignments and turned in homework to their schoolmaster that was written on clay tablets, which were then discarded or recycled as building materials, they unwittingly preserved much for us to study about the way they understood mathematics, religion, and literature.

If students at the Edubba'a were taught to read and write Sumerian, how did they become proficient in Akkadian for their future careers as scribes? This question may at first seem difficult to answer, as the curriculum may be interpreted as teaching an elite class of priests and literati a dead language with few practical applications. However, we must remember that scribal students in Nippur were native speakers of Akkadian, meaning they already understood the grammar of the language from speaking it every day and were not learning a new language from the ground up. Furthermore, even though Sumerian and Akkadian are linguistically unrelated, writing was made easier by the fact that both languages shared sign values, logograms, and some loanwords. Beyond learning the mechanics of

writing and fashioning clay tablets, one of the first steps in a student's education was the memorization and copying of different lexical lists. Some examples include lists of geographical names and domestic animals, as well as lists of simple signs and lists of personal names (fig. 2). That these lists sometimes contained glosses, or the Akkadian equivalents of the Sumerian words, would have not only helped the students master their Sumerian vocabulary but also given them a foundation in writing Akkadian as they learned commonly used sign values. This skill could then be used to compose words and sentences in Akkadian that were not directly taught.

Just how proficient would a student become in Akkadian through the curriculum at the Edubba'a? The standard view of literacy held by Assyriologists and Sumerologists today was designed by Niek Veldhuis, who proposed that there were three levels of literacy: functional, technical, and scholarly. *Functional literacy* refers to writing letters, reading receipts, and other daily uses of writing. *Technical literacy* refers to mastery of specialized vocabulary and skills for different careers, whereas *scholarly literacy* can be thought of as proficiency for academic and religious pursuits, such as composing hymns, literature, or royal documents. Students at the Edubba'a would have achieved functional literacy in Akkadian during the elementary phase of their schooling but would have needed additional training to acquire technical skills or gain scholarly literacy. Some have argued that functional literacy in Akkadian was a by-product of the grander education in Sumerian offered at the Edubba'a. However, others argue that it might have been an intended feature of the curriculum that was sought out by individuals who did not wish or need to gain further literacy in Sumerian. Unclear to us is what proportion of the students would have chosen either option, the age at which students typically began their education, and at what age they graduated. Some have argued that students would have started as young as five or six years old and that the full curriculum may have taken as long as ten years to learn. These numbers are further complicated when we focus on students who may have attended school for only the elementary phase of the curriculum. How long did it take for a student to master the elementary phase? Even if it took five years, or half the total time that a student would have been enrolled at the Edubba'a, would an eleven-year-old then be prepared to enter the workforce as a scribe or begin an apprenticeship?

While the scholarly attention that House F and its contents have received has greatly advanced our understanding of scribal education in the Old Babylonian period, we must also acknowledge that the evidence from this single Edubba'a is not representative for the entire region or period. There are still many uncertainties about scribal education that we lack the evidence to study properly. One significant gap in our understanding is how scribes received technical training for their various roles. It has been reasonably assumed that scribes would have undergone individualized, on-the-job training or would have been taken on as apprentices by experienced scribes. The nature of this training during the Old Babylonian period is impossible to ascertain from our current evidence. What is clear is that the curriculum of the Edubba'a was well-rounded enough that students who went on to become administrators, for example, were able to take the training they did receive in mathematics or in writing model contracts and then go on to do more advanced scribal work with additional training.

In the Old Babylonian period, it is not difficult to find scribes within large administrative systems, such as the palace or the temple. However, understanding their actual roles can be more challenging. We do not yet understand some of the titles we know scribes held. In other instances, certainty of a person's official title is difficult to achieve, as *tupšarrum* ("scribe") and other titles might be used interchangeably on documents or seal impressions (fig. 3). One example of a scribal position with such a nebulous title is the *mu'irrum*. The

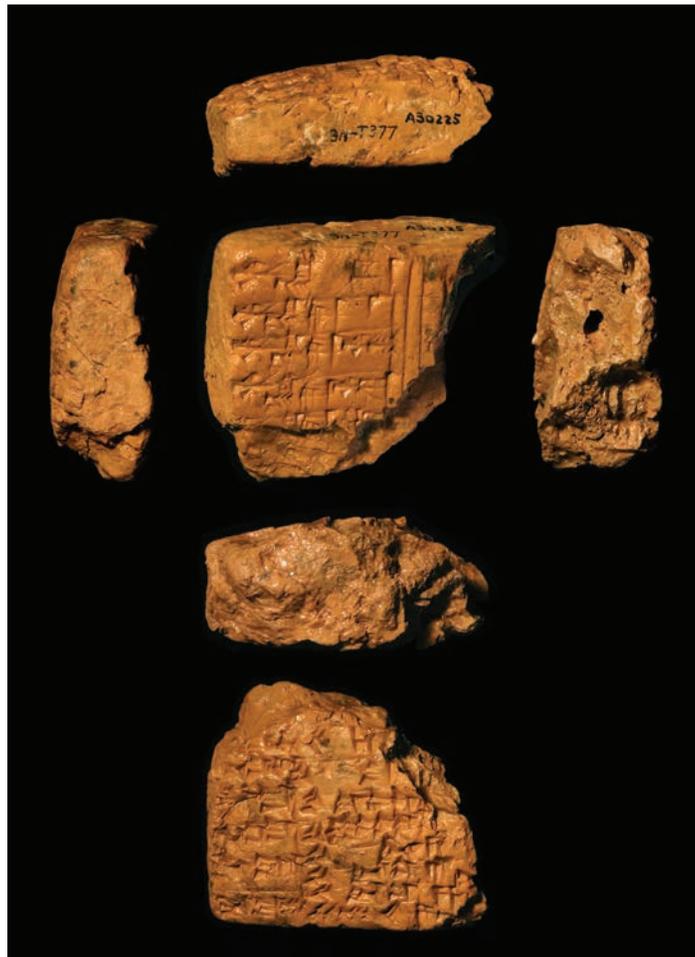


Figure 2. Tablet with *List of Personal Names* and *Syllable Alphabet B*. ISACM A 30225.



Figure 3. Old Babylonian seal of a scribe. Photo courtesy of the British Museum.

Chicago Assyrian Dictionary (CAD) defines *mu'irrum* as “commander” or “director,” but this administrator’s real responsibility was to recruit seasonal labor from rural communities and smaller urban populations across Babylonia. In this role, the *mu'irrum* negotiated with local political structures and dealt specifically with *rabiānū*, local leaders or mayors. In this capacity, the *mu'irrum* created contracts for employment, much as a human-resources representative might hire independent contractors for specific projects today. But ancient human-resources managers would not have been best described as “commanders,” and they certainly would not have held prisoners in their homes in the way that one court document describes the task of one particular *mu'irrum*: holding a cattle thief in his home for four days (Textes cuneiforms, Musées du Louvre 1, 29:23, 28f.). This instance highlights how administrators at different levels were sometimes given responsibilities that fell completely outside the scope of their normal work. It also shows the difficulties one can encounter when trying to understand the specific functions associated with different titles, for there is no Babylonian equivalent of a modern job description.

On the other hand, some scribal positions are well understood thanks to archaeologists’ discovery of personal archives or letters written by individuals in the course of their administrative duties. For example, the title *šassukkum*, which the CAD defines as a “land registrar,” is quite well attested. A *šassukkum* worked as part of a department alongside other *šassukkū* (plural form), who in turn managed teams of field surveyors (*šatammū*). The primary responsibility of a *šassukkum* was to keep track of land ownership. This duty required both functional and technical literacy in Akkadian, mathematical skills, and good organizational skills, as the *šassukkum* was responsible for maintaining an archive of official records regarding different properties. An accurate archive was especially important to the king, who needed to know what land could be awarded as payment to soldiers for their service. As an authority on land tenure, a *šassukkum* was likely to be mentioned in letters and legal documents involving disputes over property ownership. In this capacity, a *šassukkum* would verify the claims being made and check for potentially forged documents.



Figure 4. Šamaš-Hazir tablet. Photo courtesy of the Yale Babylonian Collection.

One *šassukkum*, named Šamaš-hazir, is very familiar to students of Assyriology, as letters written to him by King Hammurabi (ca. 1792–1750 BCE) appear frequently in Akkadian curricula (fig. 4). Šamaš-hazir held the office for thirteen years in the city of Larsa during the reign of Hammurabi. In some ways, Šamaš-hazir had considerable power and freedom in his role. In letters from Hammurabi ordering Šamaš-hazir to give land to various recipients, only the region and amount of land are specified. The *šassukkum*, after taking into account practical concerns such as bordering properties and canals, had the discretion to decide what land would be given to whom as compensation for their service to the king. While Šamaš-hazir is certainly the best-known *šassukkum*, likely he was not the best. In fact, Hammurabi became angry with Šamaš-hazir and in a letter accused him of giving rations to people who did not qualify to receive them and of failing to complete some of his duties. Hammurabi states, “(If) you don’t quickly give satisfaction to these messengers, well then it’s as if you were overstepping the mark. You will not be forgiven!” (Altbabylonische Briefe in Umschrift und Übersetzung 4, 11.; translation by Baptiste Fiette).

The distinctions between the different titles and positions held by ancient scribes are important to our understanding not only of administrative systems in the Old Babylonian period but also of scribal education. To comprehend fully the pedagogical practices of schoolteachers at places such as House F in Nippur and evaluate the efficacy of the curriculum, we must understand what types of scribes were being produced and how they put their education to use outside the classroom. Hopefully, future discoveries will further our understanding of technical literacy and of how specialized training was provided to scribes for different professional roles.

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HOUSE F AT NIPPUR

MORE THAN A HOUSE

House F at Nippur is more than simply a domestic house. In addition to being a place where people lived, it was also a school. It was identified as a school on the basis of the tablets found in the house, which were not saved on purpose but rather reused as building material or trampled into the floor. Prior to the discovery of House F, it was believed that schools in ancient Mesopotamia were similar to modern ones: large, purpose-built spaces filled with many students. House F, however, demonstrates that schools could be quite small, with space for only a small number of students.



TABLETS FROM HOUSE F AS “SNAPSHOTS” OF SCRIBAL IDENTITY AND SCHOOL LIFE

by Jane Gordon

The Sumerian literary text known as the *Kesh Temple Hymn* opens on a scene of spontaneous divine inspiration: Enlil, the chief god of the Babylonian pantheon and resident god of the city of Nippur, “went forth from the house,” and as he did so,

The four corners of the world grew green like an
orchard for Enlil.
There Kesh was, lifting its head to him, (and)
as Kesh was lifting its head among the lands,
Enlil began to praise Kesh.

This scene serves as an origin story for the rest of the text: the extravagant praises of the temple in the city of Kesh that follow are Enlil’s praises from that moment.

But one other crucial detail is given in the text between the point when Enlil begins to praise Kesh and the praises themselves. We are told that

As Nisaba was the decision-maker there,
from those words she twisted it together.
That which was written was set on a tablet by
(her) hand.

Therefore, the text contains within it the story not only of its own creation but also of its *being written down*—and by none other than Nisaba, goddess of writing and administration and the patron of scribes.

This is a fun detail in the text in and of itself, an enjoyable moment of meta-commentary in what is a particularly ancient work of literature—the earliest written version of it that we know of dates to the mid-third millennium BCE. Yet this scene of copying down words onto a tablet takes on new significance when we consider this text’s context of use in the scribal schools of Babylonia during the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000–1595 BCE). Nisaba’s actions encapsulate the purpose to which the students training in those schools had dedicated their lives: the creation of texts recording those aspects of Babylonian life that society (or at least its scribes and the typically elite institutions and individuals that employed them) thought ought to be written down.

The *Kesh Temple Hymn* played a central role in the scribal curriculum across Babylonia. It formed part of a set of ten texts modern scholars call the *Decad*, a quasi “core curriculum” of literary texts from a range of genres that scribal students studied at the beginning of the advanced stage of their education. Having progressed from impressing large, slightly off-kilter wedges into clay to form their first signs through the increasingly confident transcription of long lists of words and signs, these students, whose native language was Akkadian, began intensively to memorize and copy down works of Sumerian literature. And their encounter with the *Kesh Temple*

Hymn, the sixth text in the sequence of the *Decad*, was not the first time that students of the scribal school would have seen their own actions reflected in the texts they were studying. A proverb some of them would have copied out when they were just starting to write full sentences in Sumerian posed the question, “A scribe who does not know Sumerian—what kind of a scribe are they?”—thereby reinforcing for the students the centrality of the language they were learning to the identity they were taking on as they did so. And of course, only a scribe who did in fact know Sumerian could write down and understand this proverb about that very subject.

Other texts in the *Decad* contain images of scribal accomplishment as well. The first text of the *Decad*, a *Praise Poem of Shulgi*—a hymn celebrating a great king of the city of Ur from several centuries earlier—includes among Shulgi’s many impressive achievements his proud statement, “I am a knowledgeable scribe of Nisaba!” Thus this text conveniently suggested to trainee scribes that to be a wise scribe was to be like this illustrious king—and conversely that this illustrious king had something in common with them.

Although it was not part of this fixed curricular unit taught across the wider region, the teachers in House F at Nippur seem to have been particularly fond of another praise poem of Shulgi, as seventeen manuscripts of it were found there. In a passage from this text that is famous among Assyriologists and was copied onto a tablet found in House F (fig. 1), Shulgi proclaims,

The scribal schools will never be altered for all of
eternity.
For all of eternity, the places of learning will never
come to an end!

The scribal student in House F who copied those words might have found it fulfilling or simply mind-boggling to contemplate how, hundreds of years after the reign of Shulgi, House F itself and the people who spent their days there participated in continuing the tradition ascribed to that king. And though it cannot be said that school has remained unaltered for eternity, just think how pleased (if not more than a little surprised!) both Shulgi and that student would be to find that people like me are still studying their words in school all these thousands of years later.

If, on the one hand, students in House F studied literary texts that connected their scribal training with illustrious kings of the past and even divine beings, they often copied out much more down-to-earth depictions of school life as well. These “school stories” take the form of catechistic dialogues about the rhythms and customs of a day at school for scribal students early in their educational journey, before they would have progressed to copying out such texts as part of their training at a more advanced stage. The beginning of one of these stories was copied down on the tablet shown in figure 2.



Figure 1. “The scribal schools will never be altered for all of eternity.” ISACM A30203. Photos by Danielle Levy.

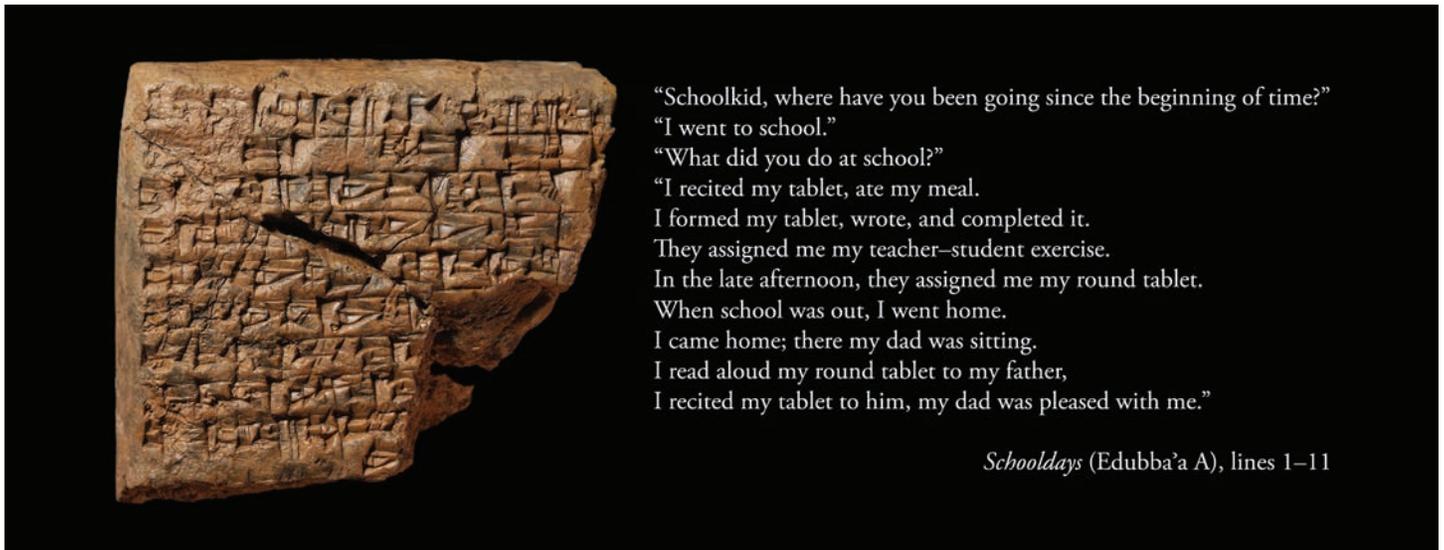


Figure 2. “I recited my tablet, ate my meal.” ISACM A30217. Photo by Danielle Levy; annotations by Marta Díaz Herrera; translation by Marta Díaz Herrera, Susanne Paulus, and Ryan D. Winters.

This story, named “*Schooldays*” by one Assyriologist because of its focus on everyday life at school, in some ways offers a more holistic view of the Edubba’a than the material evidence on its own can provide. It tells us not only about the objects that the students used but also about how they interacted with them, including through ephemeral actions, such as recitation, that leave no direct trace in

the textual record. Scholars of texts can sometimes get too focused on texts *as* texts; passages like this one from *Schooldays* remind us that texts had oral lives as well—as passages that were recited aloud and as media of interpersonal communication between students and those around them, as illustrated by the student using the tablet to impress his dad.

The school stories also enable us to play a particularly satisfying kind of matching game. In addition to containing this manuscript of *Schooldays*, House F contained several of the “teacher–student exercises” (fig. 3) mentioned in the story, while the “round tablet” in figure 4 was found in a house nearby—perhaps because the student who wrote it took it home to show a proud parent of their own.

A similar dialogue, *School Regulations*, depicts a scene of harmonious and absorbed studiousness as different pupils go about their assigned tasks. The dialogue similarly highlights the spoken aspects of education at the scribal school:

the one reading to the other,
the one reciting multiplication tables will recite
multiplication tables,
the one reciting word lists will recite word lists.

(translation by Niek Veldhuis)

It is easy to picture such a scene happening, for instance, on the benches of Room 192 in House F (fig. 5) and to imagine that the reciting students were the same ones who left behind the assignments found there (figs. 6 and 7). While doing all this reciting out loud, who knows if the students encouraged each other, or, in the words of one of the participants in a rather heated debate, which also formed part of the corpus of “school literature,” told each other, “It may

be that you have written the thematically arranged word lists up to the list of professional titles, but your tongue is not adapted to the Sumerian language” (translation by Jana Matuszak).

The school literature, taken as a whole, tells one lively (if sometimes humorously exaggerated) type of story about life in the ancient Edubba’a. But the physical tablets found in the school tell their own stories too. If the school literature seems to recount evanescent aspects of the daily life of students like the ones who attended the Edubba’a in House F, the tablets those students made capture moments of life there as well.

That an accomplished scribe was one who knew Sumerian is something several textual sources clearly indicate, from the proverb defining a scribe to the one-up-person-ship regarding matters of pronunciation displayed in the debate quoted above. But the greatest proof of this comes in the accumulated tablets from the school itself, which trace students’ progressing knowledge of the language, from individual words written with simple signs to complex literary texts whose syntax or meaning still sometimes stumps researchers today.

The tablets from House F in aggregate encompass the whole spectrum of scribal student knowledge and abilities, while each individual tablet from the school contains a snapshot of a moment on a student’s journey of becoming a scribe. On the round tablet pic-



LEFT: Figure 3. “They assigned me my teacher–student exercise.” ISACM A30276. Photo by Danielle Levy.

ABOVE: Figure 4. “In the late afternoon, they assigned me my round tablet.” ISACM A30182. Photo by Danielle Levy.



Figure 5. Excavation photo showing Level X Floor 4 of Room 192 in House F, which included benches where the students of the Edubba's likely sat to write their many tablets. ISACM P. 47262 (3N/216).



LEFT: Figure 6. "The one reciting multiplication tables will recite multiplication tables." Tablet inscribed with a multiplication table of 25. ISACM A30281. Photo by Danielle Levy.



RIGHT: Figure 7. "The one reciting word lists will recite word lists." A prism inscribed with part of the *Thematic List of Words (Ura)* listing objects made from wood. ISACM A30187. Photo by Danielle Levy.

tured in figure 4, the bottom two lines were produced by a student struggling to write the assignment—an extract with two entries from the wooden objects section of the *Thematic List of Words* (Ura)—as beautifully as the model provided in the upper two lines of the tablet. While in the model copy each individual sign is neatly written and tidily “hangs” off the horizontal line above it, the signs in the student’s version are endearingly messy, askew, and uneven. Perhaps after moving on to a proficient temple career, this student might have been embarrassed to find out that this early effort ended up as part of the historical record, but we can be charmed by it as evidence from a moment when writing was still a work-in-progress.

Meanwhile, the teacher–student exercise tablet (fig. 3) has paused frozen in time in a way that perfectly captures how this format worked: on the left-hand side the teacher wrote a model text, and on the right-hand side the student repeatedly copied it, using their fingers as “erasers” to rub out successive efforts. Some of the signs from the student’s last practice session remain visible on the tablet’s surface, alongside the smudges of their fingertips. These marks are not just touchingly familiar, human traces left behind by ancient Babylonians—they are data points worth analyzing in themselves. Scholars (including my colleague and fellow graduate student Madeline Ouimet) are beginning to pay more attention to marks other than writing that people left behind on tablets and what such marks might tell us about the practices of material text creation.

Sometimes these marks may simply reflect a student lost in thought. For example, one student created a doodle that perfectly exemplifies the modernist principle of medium specificity. Taking

advantage of the impressionable medium of clay, the student left a row of neat fingernail impressions along the top edge of a tablet inscribed with another text from the *Decad*, the *Hymn to Nungal A* (fig. 8).

The scribal student questioned in *School Regulations* about the customs of the school declares rather grandiosely that

One knows the customs of the scribal school,
but like the unknowable horizon, the unreachable,
one does not know to speak of them.

(translation by Niek Veldhuis)

In this way, the ancient Babylonian text almost parodies the situation in which modern researchers find themselves: all the innate, ancient Babylonian knowledge people carried with them and passed down to each other—knowledge of things it wouldn’t occur to someone to speak or write about—got left out of the textual record. Nevertheless, the tablets themselves tell us more than the people who made them probably ever imagined they could. Thanks to the tablets in House F at Nippur, we can catch glimpses beyond the “unknowable horizon” of centuries into the lives of ancient scribes-to-be.

Author’s note: This essay is indebted to the transformative research of several scholars on the tablets of the scribal school as material texts and evidence of pedagogical practices—Paul Delnero, Eleanor Robson, Steve Tinney, and Niek Veldhuis—and to the work of my colleagues on the curatorial team for *Back to School in Babylonia*, particularly Marta Díaz Herrera, Madeline Ouimet, and Prof. Susanne Paulus.

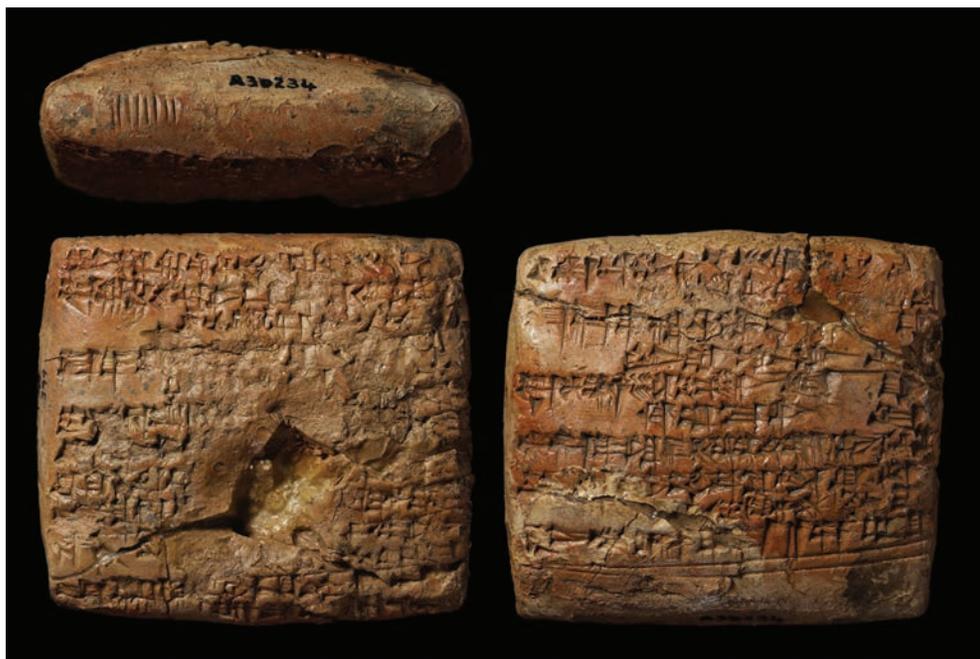


Figure 8. Tablet with fingernail impressions on its upper edge. ISACM A30234. Photo by Danielle Levy.

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- Veldhuis, Niek. 1997. “Elementary Education at Nippur: The List of Trees and Wooden Objects.” PhD diss., Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. By examining in detail the material that was being practiced on the fronts and backs of teacher–student exercise tablets, Veldhuis was able to reconstruct the order in which students learned the elementary phase of the scribal curriculum.

ISAC EVENTS

Winter Members Appreciation Day Saturday, January 13, 4:30–7:00pm For ISAC Members

Join us for food and drinks and extended members-only museum hours as we celebrate *you*, the members who help make everything we do at ISAC possible.

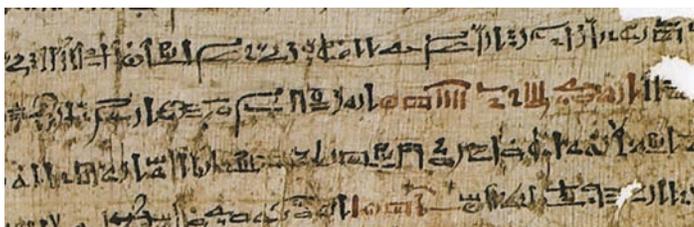
4:30–5:30pm: Various ISAC faculty members and graduate students will be stationed throughout the galleries to meet you and give you the opportunity to hear directly from them about their wide-ranging work and projects. This is a great chance to learn more about some of the less visible but equally exciting work that is going on every day at ISAC.

5:30–6:15pm: ISAC’s new director, Dr. Timothy P. Harrison, will give a special talk in Breasted Hall. This portion of the evening will also be livestreamed. To register for the live-stream please email Brad at blenz@uchicago.edu.

6:15–7:00pm: Enjoy a casual buffet dinner with fellow members and ISAC staff and faculty.

Feel free to bring a friend!

To register, visit: <https://bit.ly/WinterMember>



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Adult Education Class: Introduction to Late Egyptian Tuesdays, March 5–April 23 (8 weeks), 7:00–9:00pm Central on Zoom and recorded

Cost: Nonmembers (\$392), members (\$314), docents/volunteers/ISAC travelers (\$157), UChicago lab/charter, students, faculty, and staff (\$98)

Bundle with the other ancient Egyptian language classes (Late Egyptian and Demotic) and save 15%: Nonmembers (\$1,000), members (\$800), docents/volunteers/ISAC travelers (\$400), UChicago lab/charter, students, faculty, and staff (\$250)

Instructor: Foy Scalf, PhD, head of the ISAC Research Archives and research associate

Learn to read the Egyptian language as used by King Tutankhamun himself! Late Egyptian represents a phase of the ancient Egyptian language that appeared in the Amarna Period and was used for many genres of text for centuries afterward. Famous among Late Egyptian literature and correspondence are the Qadesh Poem of Ramses II, the Tale of Wenamun, the Contendings of Horus and Seth, the Tale of the Two Brothers, the trial documents from the murder of Ramses III, and the Late Ramesside Letters, to name just a few. In this course, students will receive introductions and instructions for using the available resources to study Late Egyptian.

Class sessions will focus on vocabulary, grammatical constructions, and guided readings of Late Egyptian texts, supplemented by manuscripts from the collections of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures Museum. Over this eight-week course, students will be exposed to the hieroglyphic writing system of Late Egyptian, over 200 hieroglyphic signs, approximately 250 vocabulary words, a selection of the most important grammatical constructions fundamental to Late Egyptian, and strategies for independent study to continue their learning journey after the class ends. There are no prerequisites for this course. Previous experience studying Egyptian hieroglyphs will be helpful, but it is not a requirement. This is a rare opportunity to gain in-depth experience with Late Egyptian, a phase of the language rarely studied outside of the university classroom. All class sessions will be recorded and available to students to pursue at their own pace.

To register, visit: <https://bit.ly/LateEgyptian>



ISAC

1155 East 58th Street
Chicago, Illinois 60637
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MEMBERSHIP

YOUR PARTNERSHIP MATTERS!

The Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures depends on members of all levels to support the learning and enrichment programs that make ISAC an important—and free—international resource.

As a member, you'll find many unique ways to get closer to the ancient Middle East—including free admission to the Museum and Research Archives, invitations to special events, discounts on programs and tours, and discounts in the Museum gift shop.

INDIVIDUAL: ANNUAL \$50 / \$40 SENIOR (65+)

FAMILY: ANNUAL \$75 / \$65 SENIOR (65+)

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ISAC MUSEUM

For visitor information and Museum hours:
isac.uchicago.edu/museum-exhibitions