News & Notes

IN THIS ISSUE

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF ANCIENT CULTURES

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

With this issue of *News & Notes*, we continue our focus on the ancient intellectual traditions of Mesopotamia. As illustrated so brilliantly by the *Back to School in Babylonia* exhibition, this rich intellectual life was nurtured and sustained by a scribal community that emerged with the advent of the earliest institutionalized social, economic, and political structures of ancient Mesopotamian society. This deep scholarly commitment—and passion—for the preservation and transmission of knowledge is reflected perhaps most vividly in the production of the extensive lexical lists that are a striking feature of the Late Uruk (ca. 3200–3000 BCE) textual record. Intriguingly, however, as Ryan Winters observes in his examination of early Mesopotamian historical memory in this issue, this early scribal tradition did not appear to have an interest in, or at least a preoccupation with, an annalistic recording of historical events and dynastic succession, though Sumerian scribes certainly communicated a concern for the orderly maintenance and transfer of kingly authority and power, as divinely sanctioned by the gods. Not until centuries later, during the Sargonic era (ca. 2292–2173 BCE), was there a shift in emphasis to the individual accomplishments of rulers. By the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000–1595 BCE), the time of the scribal "school" at Nippur, a complex and multilayered historical consciousness had developed.

This issue also features articles by Marta Díaz Herrera, on the decipherment of cuneiform and the important role that lexical lists played in this process, and by Danielle Levy, on women, gender, and religion in ancient Mesopotamia. Marta accentuates the role that syllabary texts—elementary exercise tablets used by beginners (students!) to learn to read and write—played in the decipherment of Akkadian, and non-coincidentally, the prevalence of a similar syllabary in the scribal school building (House F) at Nippur. Danielle, meanwhile, draws attention to the underrecognized involvement of women in ancient Mesopotamian scribal education. Women were associated with scribal schools as goddesses, but they also participated as students. One particular text recovered from House F, *Two Women* B, records a debate between two housewives about the ideal qualities of a woman. Other texts document the feminine attributes of goddesses, such as Inana and Nungal. Collectively, these texts infer the direct participation of women in scribal education, while attributing greater agency to women in Mesopotamian society and their meaningful involvement in a wider range of social spheres, such as the religious life of the community, than has conventionally been understood to have been the case.

Shirlee Hoffman's interview with George Sundell highlights another extraordinary dimension of the Institute community: the dedicated, critical contributions of our volunteers. George has made a singular contribution: helping to design, build, and maintain the Diyala Project's database, a commitment and effort that has spanned more than twenty years. I am therefore especially pleased to report that this invaluable legacy project will shortly also be serving as an important test case as the Institute embarks on a partnership with the University of Chicago's Regenstein Library to build a next-generation, fully integrated digital data library. More on this exciting development in a future issue of *Notes & News*.

We are deeply saddened by the passing of our dear colleague, Donald Whitcomb. Don was an inspiring presence and a wonderful colleague, friend, teacher, and valued member of the Institute for more than fifty years. He was also a true pioneer, incorporating the contributions of stratigraphic excavation and mundane material culture, especially pottery, and thereby moving the study of Islamic culture beyond the aesthetics of its monuments, art, and architecture. His scholarship fundamentally changed the field, and his memory will not be forgotten.

TIMOTHY HARRISON
Director

HISTORY BEGINS AT SUMER— OR DOES IT?

ON THE EMERGENCE OF A HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN EARLY MESOPOTAMIA   by Ryan Winters

Scribes and scribal students of the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000–1595 BCE) wrote and copied a variety of texts having to do with kings and events of the past. This included copying original inscriptions of kings of the Sargonic, Ur III, Isin, and Larsa dynasties; hymns composed under and in honor of these kings; and historiographic lists such as the *Sumerian King List*. Literary compositions such as the Sumerian *Curse of Agade*, as well as legends about Sargonic kings written in Akkadian, were also copied. Such texts reveal the historical consciousness of the Babylonians—their awareness and interpretation of events that happened in their land centuries earlier. While the transmission of royal inscriptions and hymns seems to have been faithful to the originals, historiographic texts such as the *Sumerian King List* and the *Curse of Agade* are not concerned so much with historical facts as they are with interpreting history through a cultural and religious lens. Piotr Steinkeller has recently argued that a much more fruitful approach than probing this mythical history in search of a "kernel of truth" is to attempt to understand it on its own terms, according to its own symbolic language.

At any rate, from the perspective of a history of facts, the Old Babylonian memory extended no further back than the Sargonic period (2292–2173 BCE). Beyond this point, one encounters figures such as the Urukean kings Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and Gilgamesh, whose historical reality is unverifiable. Most of the tales involving these figures seem purely mythical, though some of them (such as *Gilgamesh and Akka*) seem to have a more genuinely historical flavor and even involve figures whose historicity is verifiable (in this case, Enmebaragesi, the king of Kish and rival of Gilgamesh).

Looking back across the third millennium BCE, this cutoff point for the factualness of Babylonian historical memory is no coincidence. Indeed, the development of a robust written historical tradition—recording events and the names of actors, or organizing information about the past in a systematic or reflective way—was a relatively late development in Babylonia. It did not come about until the Sargonic period, with the advent of the Akkadian dynasty and its new model of heroic, personality-focused kingship. In Sumer, there had persisted for centuries an apparent apathy, if not an outright hostility, toward the writing of annalistic texts emphasizing the deeds and accomplishments of a ruler.

Across early civilizations, the development of an interest in recording and passing down to later generations information about recent events is strongly connected with the birth of strong, centralized kingship. These kings demonstrate and justify their exercise of authority by proclaiming their achievements in written form, thus cultivating a "cult of personality." The impact left behind by strong rulers goes on to influence later generations—so much so that contemporary rulers must either identify with or distance themselves

from the memory of former kings. And thus, a historiographic tradition is born.

In contrast to the Akkadian kings and to kings of other early civilizations, Sumerian rulers lacked a strong cult of personality. They derived their authority not so much through their lineage or personal qualities as by virtue of the role they filled and their relationship with the divine. Much social and political authority remained in the hands of the temple community, composed of managers, administrators, and scribes, from whose ranks the rulers came. Reflecting the interests of this managerial class, the early Sumerian worldview saw time and history as static or cyclical rather than progressive and dynamic. In this essay, I will trace the development of the native Mesopotamian historical tradition (and the lack thereof) from the earliest written sources through the Old Babylonian period.

Although prehistory could be said to end when the earliest written sources became available—that is, when the Sumerians invented writing in the Late Uruk period (ca. 3200–3000 BCE)—centuries would pass before the Sumerians began to record their own history. The earliest royal inscriptions emerged only some five to seven hundred years later, and while they do contain some historical information, it is incidental to their main purpose; these inscriptions left no impact on later generations. In contrast, the memory of Akkadian kings and their deeds would persist until the end of cuneiform civilization. A typically Sumerian lack of interest in narrating historical facts reasserted itself under Gudea of Lagash (ca. 2100 BCE; fig. 1). Under the Neo-Sumerian kings (ca. 2100–2000 BCE), a kind of compromise between both systems—the traditional Sumerian and the Akkadian—was reached (fig. 2).

Writing was invented in the late Uruk period by managers and administrators for the purposes of bookkeeping and accounting. The practice of writing itself seems to have emerged from a complicated system of para-writing that employed tokens, seals, counting boards, and the like, which had been used for centuries before writing (and continued to be used later). Reflecting their emergence from such systems, the numerical notations and systems of measurement used in the earliest accounts were very complex. As in later periods, the accounts were geared toward economic planning, as well as the tracking of administrative responsibility. But unlike in later accounts, names of individuals in the earliest ones are rare and uncertain; instead, references seem usually to be made to offices or roles, such as "the priest" or "the ruler" or "the one in charge of beer." Moreover, they lack any system of dating. Most of them seem to have been intended for short- to medium-term use, and we have no evidence that many years' worth of texts were kept and later consulted and reorganized, as was done with such accounts in the later Neo-Sumerian period.

Alongside the earliest accounts, we find the first lexical lists—a

LEFT: Figure 1. Inscribed statue of Gudea of Lagash (ca. 2100 BCE). Source: Wikimedia Commons.

RIGHT: Figure 2. Rock relief at Darband-i-Gawr depicting a Neo-Sumerian king, probably Shulgi (ca. 2075 BCE). The victorious pose shows the clear influence of Akkadian art, but the characteristic headgear and rendering of the beard reveal strong affinities to other known depictions of Neo-Sumerian kings. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin FRCP (Glasg), licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0.

uniquely Mesopotamian genre that, in addition to helping teach and maintain the writing system, filled an important intellectual and ideological role among the scribal class. The famous professions list *Archaic Lu* A is a systematic collection of archetypes and roles—a comprehensive portrayal of a static reality. And while this list went on to enjoy a very long transmission history, even surviving in a later form through the Old Babylonian period and beyond, there is nothing at all about this text that could be considered "historical" in the sense of recording sequential events or naming specific individuals. Indeed, it is entirely ahistorical in its scope and outlook.

Turning to Uruk-period art, we find a strong, almost exclusive focus on the ruler. He is a figure with a distinct and consistent appearance: bearded, sporting a broad-brimmed cap, and wearing a mesh kilt. He is shown as high priest, military leader, and hunter.

He bears a close, special relationship with the goddess Inana. But never do we learn this ruler's name or hear of his deeds. The figure in art is not a specific individual but a general type. His authority did not derive from his personality but from the role he filled, and especially from his relationship with the divine (fig. 3). His actions, as depicted, do not refer to historical events but belong to a corpus of symbolism. One could even say that scenes such as the procession depicted on the famous Warka Vase existed outside the flow of time.

To the extent that later generations remembered anything at all about the Uruk period—which represented the height of Sumerian influence and expansion throughout the world—these memories may have been assigned to the mythical antediluvian period, perhaps mixed with the period of legendary Urukean kings such as Enmerkar and Gilgamesh. For modern researchers, too, the Uruk period, de-

spite the availability of written records from it, has rather the character of protohistory.

Writing in the Uruk period was thus used by administrators, managers, and accountants; the scribes produced and maintained a rich lexical corpus, but they showed no interest in recording royal deeds or historical events. This absence cannot be ascribed to some shortcoming on the part of the writing system itself but is instead a reflection of cultural attitudes and the result of a conscious choice. It is precisely the absence of emphasis on the person of the king that explains the lack of historical records in early Sumer. What we have instead are the outputs of the scribal administrative class. This class was more interested in perpetuating an ahistorical reality—a world in which the true rulers were the gods and where humans exercised authority by virtue of the roles the gods assigned to them, a world of unchanging cultic symbolism rather than dynamic personal accomplishment.

In Egypt, recording the achievements of current and past rulers formed a central focus from the beginning. The Narmer Palette (fig. 4), which dates to about the thirty-first century BCE and is thus contemporary with the Uruk period, has been described by Egyptologist Bob Brier (in his 1992 book *Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians*, p. 202) as "the first historical document in the world." Whether or not it depicts a specific event, such as the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, the hieroglyphic inscription, among the earliest preserved, certainly records Narmer's name and therefore emphasizes his personal achievements. There exists also a corpus of year-names referring to the deeds of various rulers, Narmer among them, written on wooden or ivory tags; the practice of naming years after an important achievement of a ruler would come into use in Mesopotamia only centuries later, around the start of the Sargonic period. Extensive, annalistic documents such as the Palermo Stone seem to have been compiled on the basis of such year-names. This monumental stela lists the names and achievements of pharaohs from the First through Fifth Dynasties (ca. 3150–2283 BCE). It contains information about building works, religious ceremonies, taxation, trade, and military expeditions. Already starting in the First Dynasty, one begins to find shorter king lists of the same type.

To see anything comparable in Sumer—and here the *Sumerian King List* must come to mind—one must look to a much later period, when a rather different kind of document is found. The earliest surviving manuscript of the *Sumerian King List* dates to the Ur III period (ca. 2050 BCE), and it was widely copied in the Old Babylonian period, when it formed part of the scribal curriculum. Not at all concerned with recording events (only occasionally inserting brief tidbits of an anecdotal character), the *Sumerian King List* lists lengths of reigns and dynasties in sequence to perpetuate the idea that southern Mesopotamia always had a unified kingship—a notion that clashes with the reality of the division of the alluvium into independent, sometimes competing city-states in the pre-Sargonic (also known as the Early Dynastic) period (ca. 2900–2300 BCE). Needless to say, from the perspective of factual history, the *Sumerian King List* is far less rich in information than the Palermo Stone (which is not to imply that the "facts" recorded on the Palermo Stone were not filtered through a strong ideology or a kind of "mythical" understanding of reality).

The earliest Sumerian royal inscriptions emerge in the latter part of the Early Dynastic period (ca. 2600–2350 BCE). For the first time we learn the names of individual Sumerian rulers and read of their achievements, finding however a type of ruler whose generic and depersonalized character is even more pronounced than in the Uruk period. The man in the broad-brimmed cap has disappeared (now only priestly officials are depicted in such headgear) and is replaced by a new kind of ruler called *ensik*, or "steward." The *ensik* is a viceroy of the real ruler—the divine patron of the individual city-state. He is depicted no differently than any other citizen: without any regalia or special attributes (fig. 5). Inscriptions similarly emphasize that he was chosen from among the ranks of the people. Such inscriptions functioned mainly as pious dedications to a deity on the occasion of the building of a temple or the donation of a votive object rather than as glorifications of the ruler and his achievements. It would be mistaken to consider these inscriptions propagandistic, because they were above all a form of discourse with the divine realm and were typically not displayed in prominent, public locations. Tellingly, what narrative information they contained was not drawn on by later generations of scribes even though it would have been available and intelligible.

Figure 3. An anonymous ruler of the Uruk period, portrayed in ritual nudity, ca. 3200 BCE. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

The real birth of a persistent historical tradition would come only with the advent of the Akkadian Sargonic dynasty (2292–2173 BCE), when a new model of heroic, individualistic kingship emerged. In art we see a new focus on the king and his muscular body, and we encounter the first inscriptions primarily concerned with glorifying the king and chronicling his deeds. The Sargonic kings emphasized that they had done what no man had done before, swearing in the first person that their statements were true, not lies. Their rhetoric was backed up by their achievements. The scale of their military conquests was greater than had ever been seen before, and they built what could be considered the world's first empire, amassing vast wealth in the process. The constant rebellions they faced from the Sumerian south no doubt reflected the Sumerians' distaste for this new heroic kingship. For the Sumerians, the gods and goddesses were the true kings and queens, each one having a proper domain among the cities of the alluvium. Nevertheless, when the Sargon-

ic empire eventually collapsed, it left its impression, for better or worse. In the Old Babylonian period, literary texts were composed that drew on original Sargonic inscriptions as source material, and similar compositions were transmitted well into the first millennium BCE. Mixed with legend though such memories were, history as we know it had officially begun in Mesopotamia.

About 80 to 100 years after the Sargonic collapse, a new dynasty emerged in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash, whose most prominent ruler, Gudea (ca. 2000 BCE), exemplified a radical rejection of the Sargonic ideal by returning to the model of the humble and pious stewards of yore. Gudea's extensive corpus of inscriptions is completely unconcerned with narrating military affairs or political events. Instead, his inscriptions evoke a kind of sublime cultic reality. The ruler interacts—outside time, as it were—with his patron deity, Ningirsu, who has chosen Gudea to build his temple and serve as his shepherd. The surrounding lands exist only as a periphery

LEFT: Figure 4. The Narmer Palette (ca. 3200–3000 BCE), depicting the crowned pharaoh smiting his enemy. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

RIGHT: Figure 5. Enannatum I of Lagash (ca. 2450 BCE), portrayed in a pose of worship as an everyday Sumerian, without any special regalia or distinguishing characteristics. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Mary Harrsch, licensed under CC BY 2.0.

from which come precious materials, such as stone and timber, for building Ningirsu's temple at the center of the world. Gudea again portrays himself in simple attire and in the pose of a worshipper. Interestingly, he sports the broad-brimmed cap, which no ruler since the Uruk period had been depicted wearing. This headgear would remain characteristic in portrayals of Babylonian rulers through the end of the Old Babylonian period. Gudea's inscriptions emphasize not his muscles or military prowess but his wisdom, intelligence, and piety. While it is true that the building of Ningirsu's temple was an important event and an achievement on Gudea's part, his inscriptions do not situate this event in any sort of timeline or temporal framework. Whereas the Akkadian kings emphasized that they had done what no man had ever done before, Gudea's outlook was the exact opposite. He restored things to the state in which they were in primordial times, therefore evoking a cyclical rather than a progressive, telic conception of time.

The Neo-Sumerian (or Ur III) kings, who absorbed the city-state of Lagash and built a compact and highly organized state uniting all Sumer and Akkad, ended up embracing a model of kingship that was, in many respects, a compromise between the Sargonic heroism and the classical Sumerian piety typified by Gudea. Perhaps it would be better to say this model was a more careful and nuanced version of the Sargonic kingship, dressed in Sumerian clothes. The Neo-Sumerian kings maintained the Sargonic titulary, and they cultivated a heroic character by tracing their line to Gilgamesh; their deeds and conquests were celebrated on monuments and in year-names. But this kind of ruler also portrayed himself as a pious shepherd, sensitive and obedient to the will of the gods. This is the model of kingship that persisted and whose influence was felt well into the Old Babylonian period.

Figure 6. Detail from the Stela of Naram-Sîn (ca. 2250 BCE), with the armed king depicted in victory pose and wearing the horned crown of divinity. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

At this time, Sumerian scribes composed the admonishing historiographic text known as the *Curse of Agade*, which looked back on the rise and fall of the Sargonic empire. This fate was ascribed entirely to the will of the gods and excluded human influence completely—a rejection of the individualistic Sargonic ethos. The hubristic Naram-Sîn (fig. 6) had tried to exalt himself above divine will but was brutally punished, the subtext being that the Sumerian rulers of Ur had best try to learn from his mistakes. The fact that the Sargonic empire had actually continued for some time after Naram-Sîn, rather than collapsing under his rule, was irrelevant for the purposes of this tale. The text remained popular among scribes and students through the Old Babylonian period.

The collapse of the Neo-Sumerian kingdom was a far more sudden and catastrophic end than what had happened under the Akkadians. It spelled the end for Sumerian as a living language and an independent culture. The *Lament for Sumer and Ur* tried to come to grips with this fate in much the same way that the *Curse of Agade* did for Akkad. But this time, hubris did not play a role; the collapse was simply the inscrutable will of the gods. Though they may grant kingship for a period of time, they do not grant it forever.

Scribes and scribal students of the Old Babylonian period would copy the original inscriptions of both Sargonic and Ur III kings, though the former are attested in far greater quantities and left a far deeper impression. As for the pre-Sargonic kings of Sumer, hardly anything at all was remembered of them, save for some names here and there that made it into the *Sumerian King List* and a few other texts, where they are mixed among legendary figures such as Gilgamesh. The situation as we have it is not an accident of preservation but the result of deep-seated cultural attitudes that reflect sociopolitical factors. Some five to seven centuries would pass between the invention of writing and the recording of the first Sumerian royal names, and even then it was only under the Akkadians that the stream of history would truly begin to flow.

An echo of awareness of the anonymous Sumerian rulers of Uruk, and their lack of interest in recording their history, might be preserved in the beginning of the Middle Babylonian version of the *Cuthean Legend*, a literary tale about Naram-Sîn. There, Naram-Sîn laments the fact that the legendary Urukean king Enmerkar (the grandfather of Gilgamesh) failed to leave behind an inscription, with the result that Naram-Sîn can neither learn from his predecessor's example nor pray for him before the sun god.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Assmann, Jan. 2011 (1992). *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Originally published as *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. Munich: Beck.

Cooper, Jerrold. 1983. *The Curse of Agade*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Goodnick Westenholz, Joan. 1997. *Legends of the Kings of Akkade*. Mesopotamian Civilizations 7. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

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BACK TO SCHOOL IN BABYLONIA

A SPECIAL EXHIBIT

SEPTEMBER 21, 2023 – MARCH 24, 2024

ISAC MUSEUM

This issue contains articles that give a deeper look into themes explored in our recent *Back to School In Babylonia* exhibition, which was on display at the ISAC Museum from September 21, 2023, to March 24, 2024. This special exhibition was 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 reunited 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, were represented by plaster casts.

THE DECIPHERMENT OF CUNEIFORM WRITING AND THE CONTRIBUTION OF LEXICAL LISTS

by Marta Díaz Herrera

When talking about the decipherment of Near Eastern scripts and long-lost languages, most people will think first of Jean-François Champollion and the Rosetta Stone. Fewer people will know about Michael Ventris and the decipherment of Linear B, and probably very few people will be able to name the scholars, texts, and languages involved in the decipherment of cuneiform writing. This may be the case because the decipherment of the cuneiform script and the many languages that were written with it were not the achievements of a single individual, nor was there really a "Rosetta Stone of cuneiform writing"—even though the trilingual Behistun inscription of Darius the Great in Iran has been often called such and even though Henry C. Rawlinson has traditionally been credited with deciphering this writing system.

As a matter of fact, a perhaps unglamorous genre of texts—lexical lists—proved crucial for the early decipherment of cuneiform writing, as well as for the first identification and decipherment of the Sumerian language. In the same way these texts were essential for modern scholars in understanding cuneiform—in fact, we still use these lists of words and signs to elucidate the orthography and meaning of Sumerian and Akkadian words—so Old Babylonian teachers used lexical lists to teach both the cuneiform script and the Sumerian language to their pupils. The large number of tablets inscribed with lexical lists found in House F, a sample of which was displayed in the *Back to School in Babylonia* exhibition, illustrates the fundamental role of these texts as pedagogic tools in Old Babylonian Nippur.

To follow the steps of this decipherment, we must go back to the end of the eighteenth century, when, between 1772 and 1778, Carsten Niebuhr published the first detailed copies of cuneiform inscriptions from Persepolis (modern Iran), capital of the Persian empire under the Achaemenid dynasty. Although earlier accounts and drawings of this writing system had circulated in the West since the European discovery of Persepolis by García de Silva Figueroa in the seventeenth century, they were not sufficiently long or accurate to allow for their study. The Persepolitan inscriptions, like the famous Behistun ones, were trilingual—the exact same text was written three times in three languages: Old Persian, Elamite, and (Babylonian) Akkadian (fig. 1)—and the copies by Niebuhr opened the door for European orientalists to unearth these long-forgotten languages.

In 1800, Friedrich Münter, after studying the inscriptions, distinguished in Niebuhr's copies three types of writing: one alphabetic, where words were separated by a diagonal wedge (⟨) and which he correctly ventured was used to write an ancient form of Persian; one syllabic; and one ideographic, which in turn he connected to the

Figure 1. Peg found at Persepolis containing a trilingual inscription (in Old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian) of the Achaemenid king Darius. ISACM A29808B.

Mesopotamian inscriptions that had begun to arrive in Europe at the time. Building on Münter's initial steps, his knowledge of the history of the Achaemenid kings, and the work of philologists such as Isaac Silvestre de Sacy and Jean-Jacques Barthélemy on other ancient languages, in 1802 Georg Friedrich Grotefend confirmed that the alphabetic cuneiform script from Persepolis had been used to write Old Persian, and he identified the sequences "Xerxes, great king, son of Darius, king of kings" and "Xerxes, great king, son of Darius, great king, son of Hystaspes." Grotefend's achievement established the foundations for the final decipherment of Persian cuneiform in 1846—an accomplishment that has been characterized as an international enterprise, with Edward Hincks (an Irish Protestant pastor whose many contributions included proving that the signs used to write Old Persian were actually syllabic) and Norwegian-German Christian Lassen as its leading figures.

It is noteworthy that, independently of the work by Hincks and Lassen, Rawlinson, too, deciphered the already-mentioned Old Persian inscription from Behistun, which he himself had copied despite its dangerous location high on an Iranian cliff (fig. 2). Thanks to his knowledge of modern Persian and other languages of India, and on the basis of Grotefend's work, he was able to read and publish the inscription. Unfortunately, and contrary to widespread belief, this achievement occurred only after Lassen and Hincks had deciphered the Old Persian Persepolitan inscriptions.
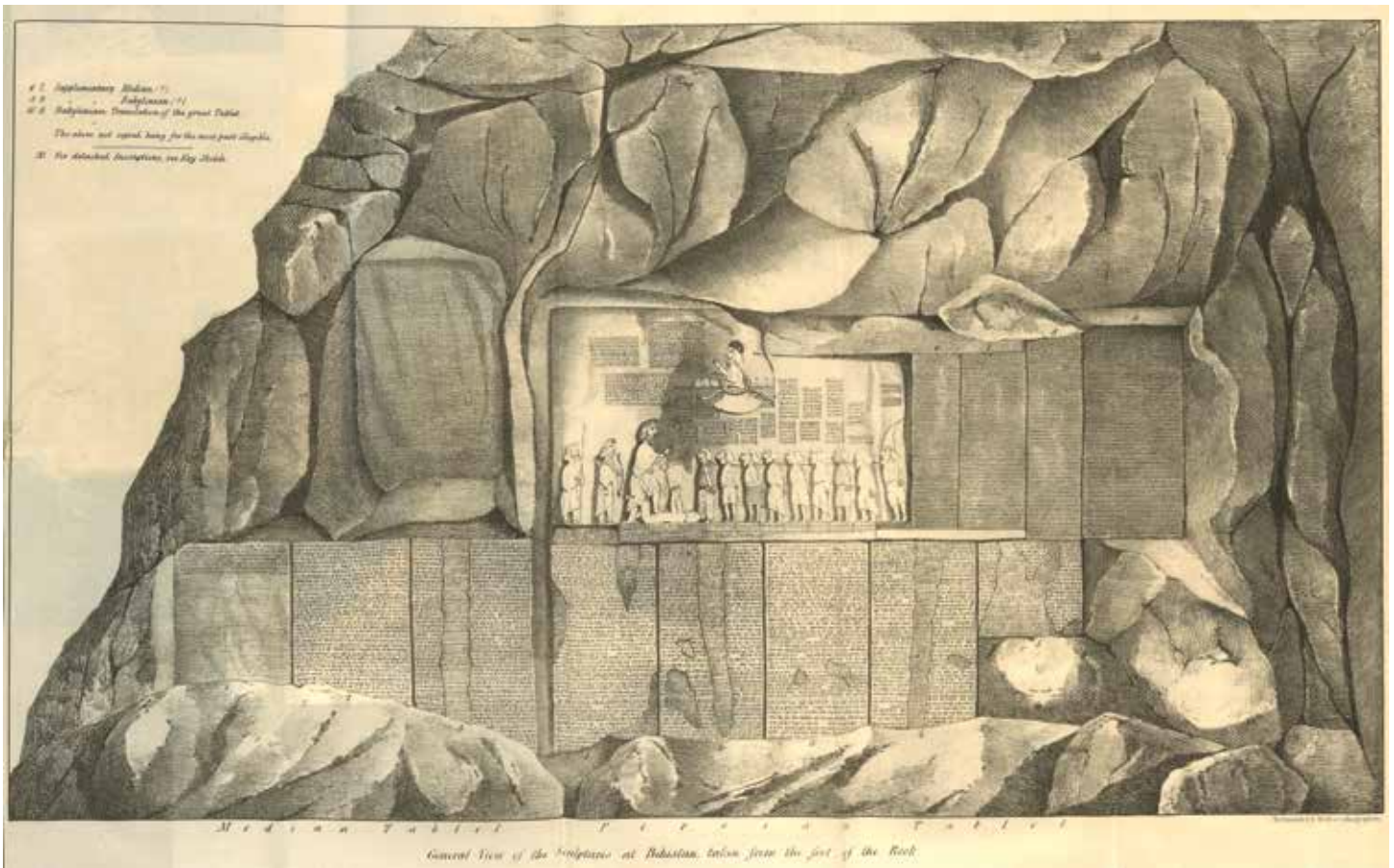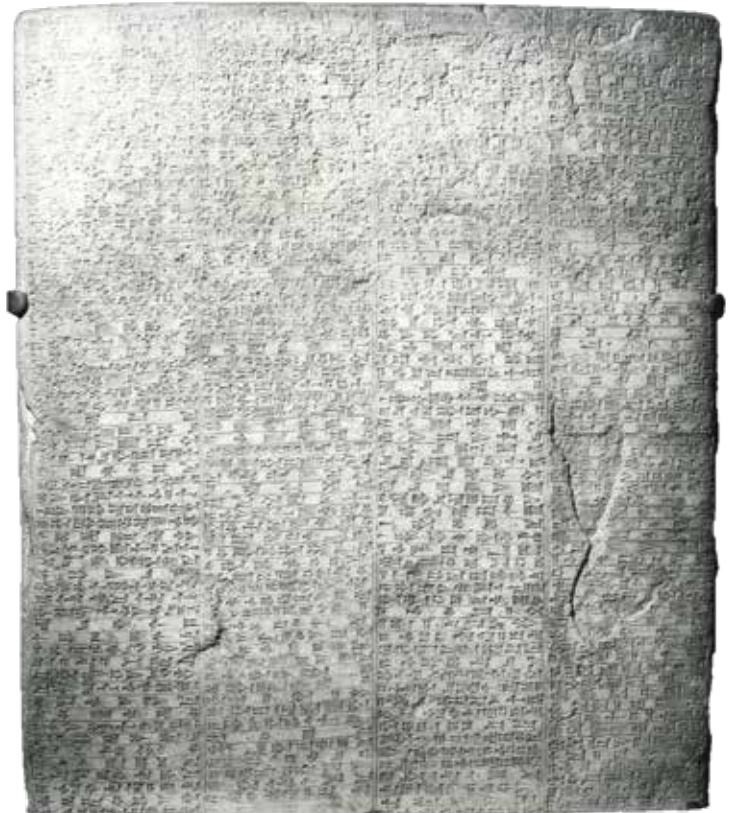
ABOVE: Figure 2. Drawing of the reliefs and trilingual inscription of Behistun by Rawlinson, 1846.

BELOW: Figure 3. The East India House Inscription (BM 129397) engraved with the annals of Nebuchadnezzar II, found in Babylon and first housed at the Museum of the East India House. Photo courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

Once Persian cuneiform had been deciphered, scholars could focus on the other two versions of the trilingual inscriptions from Persepolis and Behistun. Here, efforts were divided between the inscriptions of the "Second Kind" (of cuneiform script), written in Elamite, and the "Third Kind," written in (Babylonian) Akkadian. Thus, Nils Ludwig Westergaard and Hincks turned first to the Elamite inscriptions from Persepolis and Naksh-i-Rustam, which Westergaard himself had copied while in Iran. These Elamite inscriptions drove Hincks to the critical observation that signs with the values C(onsonant)-V(owel) and V(owel)-C(onsonant) could be combined to write closed syllables (C-V-C). Later, in 1853, on the basis of Westergaard and Hincks's work, Edwin Norris was able to publish the Elamite inscription of Behistun for the first time.

As for the inscriptions of the Third Kind, written in what is commonly called "Mesopotamian" cuneiform, Hincks again appears as a crucial figure both for the decipherment of the writing system itself and for the identification of the languages written with it. By the time Hincks focused on Mesopotamian cuneiform, which he had been looking at since at least mid-1846, several materials were available to him. Indeed, he had access not only to the Persepolitan inscriptions but also to the East India House Inscription—a large stone tablet engraved with the annals of the Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562 BCE), which was excavated in Babylon before 1803 by Sir Harford Jones Bridges (fig. 3)—and an ever-

increasing number of inscribed materials brought to Europe by the excavations undertaken in northern Iraq at Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Sharrukin), Nimrud (ancient Kalhu), and Kuyunjik (ancient Nineveh).

By comparing the materials found in Babylonia and Assyria with the Third Kind inscriptions from Persepolis, Hincks could confirm the assumption made by Münter in 1800 that the script of the third Persepolitan inscription and the texts unearthed in ancient Mesopotamian sites were connected. The writing was Mesopotamian cuneiform, and the language Akkadian, which Hincks, already in 1846, correctly described as having "much in common with the Semitic languages" (though the name "Akkadian" was not yet used to describe the Assyrian and Babylonian dialects). That same year, Hincks was able to read the first Akkadian word that was not a personal name: the personal pronoun *anāku* "I."

In 1849, Hincks presented his paper *On the Khorsabad Inscriptions*. A large part of this work was dedicated to two related, and very important, observations: many, if not all, cuneiform signs had both a logographic and a phonetic value, and, additionally, signs could have *more than one* phonetic value. With respect to the first observation, Hincks took the fundamental step of suggesting that the value of at least some cuneiform signs could be derived from their value in a foreign, as-yet-unknown language. Thus he wrote in a footnote:

> It is possible, too, that the word from which the phonetic value is derived may be one belonging to a different language. I will, in a subsequent section, produce an instance, in which I believe that the ordinary phonetic value of a character, namely, *pā*, the value of ⧖, was adopted from a foreign language.

This note seems to constitute the first proposal of a non-Semitic origin for cuneiform writing—a position that in the following years Hincks had to defend before all other scholars, who apparently disagreed with him. The "foreign language" proved to be none other than Sumerian.

Let us return, however, to Hincks's observations, for it is at this point that lexical lists became crucial in the process of deciphering cuneiform writing.

Between 1852 and 1853 Austen Henry Layard, a British explorer who directed the excavations at Nimrud and Kuyunjik, asked Hincks to help him with the inscriptions brought by his expedition to the British Museum. Thanks to this collaboration, Hincks discovered a fragment excavated at Nineveh (labeled K.62; fig. 4, left) that had some salient features. It consisted of three columns: the central column contained a cuneiform sign, the left column the reading of the sign, and the right column the name of the sign.

Hincks had in fact discovered the sign list that scholars now call *Syllabary* A, a list used by scribes to teach their students how to write cuneiform from the Old Babylonian period until the demise of this writing system in the first century of our era. Through this fragment, whose find Hincks announced in a footnote to his article "On the Assyrio-Babylonian Phonetic Characters" (1852), he could finally prove that cuneiform signs had syllabic values and could indeed be polyphonic—that is, a single sign could have multiple phonetic readings. This discovery has been considered to mark the end of the first phase of the decipherment of Mesopotamian cuneiform.

Dozens of tablets with a syllabary similar to those identified by Hincks were also found in House F. Syllabaries were elementary school exercises used by beginners for learning how to write their first cuneiform signs after having practiced how to shape a tablet and impress single wedges. At House F, the only such syllabary used was *Syllable Alphabet* B (fig. 4, right), which, incidentally, is attested only at Nippur. In this syllabary, each new sign is added to the previous one, thus creating series of simple sign combinations that the students had to memorize, as exemplified by ISACM A30213, inscribed with the beginning of *Syllable Alphabet* B (table 1).

Table 1. Cuneiform signs and transliteration of the first lines of *Syllable Alphabet* B as preserved on ISACM A30213.

Cuneiform signs			Transliteration		
𒀀	𒀀		A	A	
𒀀	𒀀	𒀀	A	A	A
𒀀	𒆪		A	KU	
𒀀	𒆪	𒆪	A	KU	KU
𒈨	𒈨		ME	ME	
[𒈨]	𒀀		[ME]	A	
𒈨	𒈨	𒀀	ME	ME	A

In addition, *Syllabary* A was a shorter, simpler version of a more advanced list, the *List of Simple Signs* (Ea), also used at House F. This list was created during the Old Babylonian period and became the most important sign list in Mesopotamia, for it included more than 1,000 entries listing the most common readings of basic Sumerian signs—as Hincks discovered *Syllabary* A did, too. In the more complex *List of Simple Signs* (Ea), each entry begins with a vertical wedge 𒁹, followed by the pronunciation of the sign and then the sign itself (fig. 5).

But let's not abandon Hincks's work on lexical lists, as the syllabaries from Nineveh were not the only lists crucial to the early decipherment of cuneiform writing and the languages written with it.

Indeed, once Hincks confirmed his first claim that the Mesopotamian cuneiform signs represented syllables, not letters, and one sign could have more than one value, he focused on proving his theory about the non-Semitic origin of this writing system. To do so, he turned his attention to the bilingual tablets that had been found at Nineveh. In 1856, Hincks sent a letter to Hermann Brockhaus, the editor of the *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, with a first edition of nine bilingual tablet fragments containing lists of words in Sumerian (which he called "Accadian") and Akkadian ("Assyrian" in his terminology). Eight of the nine tablets edited by Hincks contained passages from the list of words known as the *Legal Phrasebook*, which modern scholars also call *kiulutinbiše* ("at its agreed time") based on its first Sumerian line, or *ana ittīšu* in Akkadian, the first line of the Middle Assyrian (1500–1000 BCE) version (table 2).

LEFT AND RIGHT: Figure 4. Tablet with a copy of *Syllabary* A (K.62, left) excavated at Nineveh and first identified by Hincks, and a school tablet (ISACM A30213, right) from House F at Nippur with the beginning of *Syllable Alphabet* B on display in the *Back to School in Babylonia* exhibition. Photo of K.62 courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum; photo of ISACM A30213 by Danielle Levy.

BELOW: Figure 5. Copy of the *List of Simple Signs* (Ea) preserved on UM 55-21-347, on display in the *Back to School in Babylonia* exhibition, with detail showing the organization of the list. Photo courtesy of the Penn Museum and Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative. Annotations by Marta Díaz Herrera.

uš	BAD
ziz	BAD
šumun	BAD
til	BAD
be	BAD
bad	BAD

Table 2. Comparison of Hincks's edition of one of the fragments published in 1856 and the passage in *Legal Phrasebook*.

Bilingual text 1 (Hincks 1856, 517)			*Legal Phrasebook* 1, 69–72 (after DCCLT)		
Sumerian	Akkadian	Translation	Sumerian	Akkadian	Translation
in lal	iskul	"He weighed"	in-la$_2$	*iš-qu$_2$-ul*	"He weighed"
in lalis	iskulu	"He has weighed"	in-la$_2$-eš	*iš-qu$_2$-lu*	"They weighed"
in lalˤi	isaḳal	"He weighs"	in-la$_2$-e	*i-ša-qal*	"He will weigh"
in lalˤi*kum*	isaḳalu	"He will weigh"	in-la$_2$-e-ne	*i-ša-qa-lu*	"They will weigh"

This list is first attested in Old Babylonian Nippur and contains administrative and legal expressions used in daily-life Babylonian contracts. Although this list is not attested at House F, it was part of the legal training of Babylonian students elsewhere in Nippur, and the terminology from the list is indeed found in model contracts copied by the students of House F as preparation for their professional careers after graduating from school. A case in point, ISACM A30173, inscribed with a model contract and displayed in the *Back to School in Babylonia* exhibition, contains the Sumerian phrase *ki-ulutinbiše* "at its agreed time" in lines 6 and 9 (fig. 6). Beyond the Old Babylonian copies from Nippur, the list is known only from Middle Assyrian tablets from Assur and a few Neo-Assyrian copies from Nineveh, the ones to which Hincks had access for his research.

Even though Hincks's translations of both the Sumerian and Akkadian versions were imperfect (see table 2), he recognized the language in the first column as agglutinative. That inference led to his mistakenly characterizing the language as Turanian (a now-obsolete language family), based on its typological similarity with Turkic and other Uralo-Altaic languages, which are also agglutinative. Be that as it may, the path to deciphering the Sumerian lan-

guage, too, had thus been inaugurated, and the role that lexical lists have played in the ongoing study of this language isolate has been and still is essential.

Of course, we cannot conclude this brief account without mentioning the event that is (and was at the time) considered to mark the official date of the decipherment of Mesopotamian cuneiform in 1857. Its promoter was William Henry Fox Talbot, a disciple of Rawlinson who, after acquiring a lithograph of a soon-to-be-published inscription of the Middle Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I (1114–1076 BCE), decided to send a translation of it to the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland requesting that the text be sent to three other scholars—Rawlinson, Hincks (who had moved on to research other questions, such as the grammar and meaning of Akkadian texts), and Jules Oppert (one of the early scholars to work on Sumerian, and the one who actually proposed its name). The translations by the four scholars were similar enough to conclude that Mesopotamian cuneiform had finally been deciphered. Work on the Sumerian and Akkadian languages continued—and continues—to be done. In this unending endeavor, lexical lists remain fundamental sources not only for understanding cuneiform writing and texts, especially those written in Sumerian, but also for reconstructing both the intellectual history of Mesopotamia and, as shown in the *Back to School in Babylonia* exhibition, the scribal curriculum at schools such as House F in Nippur.

Note: This article is based on and indebted to the research of Peter T. Daniels (1994, 2020) and Kevin J. Cathcart (2011).

Figure 6. Tablet from Nippur inscribed with the beginning of *Legal Phrasebook* on the obverse (HS 0260, left), and House F tablet inscribed with a model contract (ISACM A30173, right). Photo of HS 0260 courtesy of the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative and the Hilprecht Collection, Jena; photo of ISACM A30213 by Danielle Levy.

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WOMEN, GENDER, AND RELIGION IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA

THE VIEW FROM HOUSE F   by Danielle Levy

Like many women in the ancient world, women in Mesopotamia lived in a patriarchy and generally fell under the jurisdiction of their fathers and husbands. The concept of an "ideal" woman in the Old Babylonian period aligns with typical patriarchal standards—she is a wife, a mother, and a caretaker. Nevertheless, Mesopotamian women appear to have lived robust and somewhat independent lives beyond the domestic sphere. Depending on their socioeconomic status, women also actively participated in society's religious, economic, and literary domains. At times they even acquired their own property.

One of the spheres in which elite women participated was scribal education. Women appear in the context of scribal schools in two primary ways: in literature—mostly in the form of goddesses—and as students themselves. In House F specifically, scribes were taught about the ideal woman through texts such as *Two Women* B (fig. 1), a debate between two housewives that underscores the importance of women acting as good wives and domestic authorities. However, scribal students' additional education about goddesses such as Inana and Nungal introduced them to different representations of femininity that often contrasted with typical gender norms. In this way, religious texts in the scribal curriculum both permitted the increased appearance of female characters throughout the scribes' education and introduced them to more nuanced concepts of womanhood. Furthermore, most of the women who attended scribal schools were studying to become members of temples as priestesses, once more demonstrating the role of religion in introducing women to the scribal milieu. In fact, even though most scribal students were male,

in Sumerian mythology it was a goddess—Nisaba—who was the patron of the scribal arts.

Religion played a crucial role in expanding women's agency not only in the sphere of scribal education but also more broadly in ancient Mesopotamian society. Indeed, one of the most prominent ways women contributed to society outside their domestic duties was through religious engagement. The ancient Mesopotamian world was deeply religious, with all aspects of life being understood as existing under the rule of a whole pantheon of deities, both female and male. However, while ancient Mesopotamia's patriarchy existed in tandem with its religiosity, religion and its accompanying elements (rituals, deities, worshippers) uniquely both expanded and disrupted the gender norms present. For instance, as priestesses, women gained economic independence and respected status. Furthermore, as divine entities, goddesses held powerful positions that diverged from the patriarchal notion of female subservience. In this way, goddesses were able to inhabit and exemplify traditionally masculine traits in accompaniment with their femininity. Women's individual relationship to divinity in Mesopotamia is particularly fascinating not despite their existence within a patriarchy but largely because of it.

For example, one of the most important and complex deities in ancient Mesopotamia was Inana, also known as Ištar, the goddess of sex and war. She frequently features in the literary texts from House F's scribal education curriculum. While Inana is sometimes portrayed as engaging in typically feminine tasks, such as using spindles, in literature she appears as existing and participating primarily in typically masculine and male-dominated spheres, such as battles

Figure 1. A fragment from House F of the literary dispute between two housewives known as *Two Women* B. ISACM A30300. Photos by Danielle Levy.

and quests for power. The language used to describe her is often violent and aggressive. Indeed, in one text that students studied at House F—*Inana and Ebih* (fig. 2)—she is depicted as "drenched in blood, rushing around in great battles" (translation from Black et al. 2004, 334). In this manner, Inana defies gender boundaries while maintaining extreme cultural and religious significance and a highly respected status. Inana's divinity places her in a position that permits her to circumvent the strict gender-based expectations placed on other women in Mesopotamian society.

Paradoxically, though, Inana also embodies the extremely feminine by engaging in frequently attested promiscuity and embodying feminine beauty. At times, she defies her battle-thirsty aggression and acts compassionately, making her a quite nuanced deity. In light of her prevalence in extradomestic domains and her masculine traits, her worshippers' common reference to her as "mother" confounds the concept of maternity, one of the most important aspects of womanhood in ancient Mesopotamia. Thus this juxtaposed embodiment of both the extreme masculine and feminine makes Inana's very existence a defiance of Mesopotamian society's concept of patriarchal gender expectations.

Indeed, though not very well attested, Inana's gender identity itself is quite androgynous, with some scholars arguing that she was actually both male and female. In one Neo-Assyrian royal hymn from the first millennium BCE, Inana describes herself as saying, "When I stand at the rear of battle, verily I am the woman who comes and draws near. When I sit in the ale-house, I am a woman (but) verily I am an exuberant man" (translation from Cohen 1975, 606). Furthermore, on one cylinder seal (fig. 3), Inana is visually depicted with both male and female iconographic elements: her pose and weapons are clearly masculine, while her body and face are quite feminine. Such an interpretation of Inana as gender-nonconforming would further complicate modern understandings of Mesopotamia's definitions of gender identity in relation to one's sex. Beyond Inana's own defiance of gender expectations, she uniquely inspired gender-nonconformity in her worshippers as well. Paralleling Inana's gender androgyny, her male followers are described as engaging in ritualistic cross-dressing. Consequently, these men, through their religious engagement, not only were able to but actively did disrupt gender boundaries in ancient Mesopotamian society.

Figure 2. A tablet from House F containing an extract from the literary text *Inana and Ebih*. ISACM A30228. Photos by Danielle Levy.

Figure 3. A cylinder seal of Inana-Ištar standing on a lion. ISACM A27903. Photo courtesy of the ISAC Museum.

Another, though less central, goddess in Mesopotamia is Nungal, the goddess of prison. While perhaps less significant in broader Mesopotamian society, Nungal played an important role in the scribal education curriculum. Indeed, that the *Hymn to Nungal* A became one of the "classics" of the literary curriculum in Nippur scribal schools certainly played a significant role in preserving Nungal's legacy. The *Hymn to Nungal* A immediately follows *Inana and Ebih* in the *Decad*, an ordered set of ten texts chosen to begin scribal students' education in Sumerian literature. The presence of these texts in the set curriculum of the *Decad* shows that scribal students' education included literature about goddesses who represent interesting examples of nonadherence to traditional gender norms.

As prison warden, Nungal holds extreme power over her prisoners, many of whom are men. Such a position is perhaps a bit unexpected for a goddess, since women in Mesopotamian society did not hold the same legal power as men did. For example, women were not permitted to act as witnesses in legal cases, and the people involved in the legal system, such as judges, were all men. So it appears that the legal system was considered a male responsibility. As a female deity, therefore, Nungal challenges the notion of justice as a masculine field and in this arena diverges from typical gender roles. However, her status as female is not entirely unexpected, for prison was considered a more "compassionate" form of legal punishment compared to the death penalty. Thus, because compassion was considered a feminine trait, Nungal appears as a more nuanced diety, one both conforming to and pushing against Mesopotamia's expected gender roles.

This duality is emphasized further by Nungal's description of the prison itself. In the *Hymn to Nungal* A (fig. 4), while prisoners describe their detainments as gruesome and terrifying, Nungal equates her domain with a woman's womb, stating, "Its brick walls crush evil men and give rebirth to just men" (translation from Black et al. 2004, 341). With this equivocation, Nungal directly opposes the standard of the legal system as a male sphere; however, the womb—

and birth-giving generally—was the ultimate symbol of femininity and womanhood in Mesopotamia. So, interestingly, Nungal dominates these men as the prison warden and acts in a male-dominated domain while using her femininity—that is, compassion and child-bearing ability—to do so.

The relationship between divinity and breaking gender norms occurred not just for goddesses themselves but also for their worshippers. One of the most significant examples of important religious groups pushing against patriarchal standards in the human sphere is the *nadītum* priestesses. Attested only in the Old Babylonian period, *nadītum* priestesses were cloisters of women who participated in the cultic worship of a patron deity. These women were of elevated status, many of them being the daughters of affluent families in their communities—likely the same families from which the scribal students in Nippur's House F came. Despite the prominence of *nadiātum* in Nippur and the fact that these priestesses are attested in the same period in which House F existed, they are not explicitly mentioned in any of the tablets recovered from House F. However, there is strong evidence elsewhere that these priestesses—because of their elevated status—were literate and likely received an education similar to that of the House F students. As an additional result of their special status, these women were also property and land owners who inherited shares of their family estates equivalent to those of their brothers—an uncommon and unique advantage not attested in dowries given to other, nonconsecrated women. In some circumstances, *nadītum* priestesses are described as even owning houses and fields so large that they need stewards to manage them (fig. 5).

The word *nadītum* itself is derived from the Akkadian word *nadû*, meaning "to cast out, throw away." But an alternative definition pertaining to agricultural fallowness suggests that *nadītum* denotes "fallow," or "barren," women. That these priestesses were not legally allowed to have children offers more evidence to affirm this

Figure 4. A tablet from House F containing an extract from the *Hymn to Nungal* A. ISACM A30234. Photos by Danielle Levy.
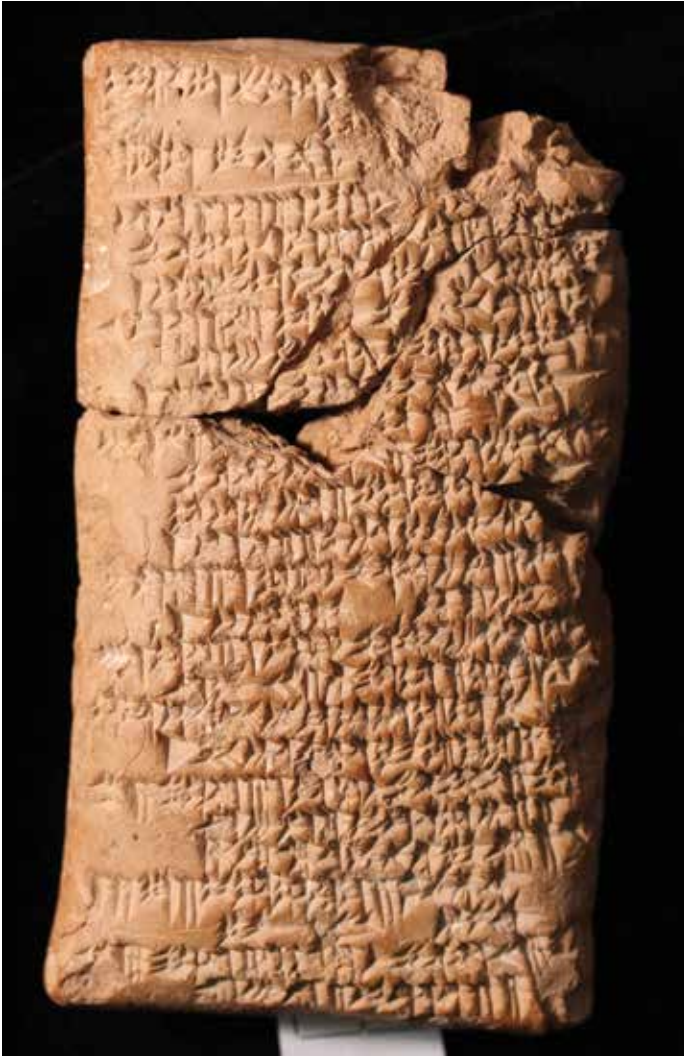
Figure 5. A late Old Babylonian tablet recording fields belonging to *nadītum* priestesses. YPM BC 019047, YBC 04983. Photo courtesy of the Yale Babylonian Collection staff.

interpretation of the word's etymology. Initially, such a law appears greatly contradictory to Mesopotamia's patriarchal standard of women acting as birth-givers. However, it was this childlessness that not only greatly defined these women but also, counterintuitively, contributed to their elevated social status. By imposing on themselves a standard (childlessness) that directly defied the pinnacle of womanhood in their society, the *nadiātum* distinguished themselves from all other women, even those of similar socioeconomic standing. While, as expected, this difference resulted in these priestesses' isolated position in society, it also uniquely allowed them to establish a group identity, one inherently tied to their involvement in their religious cult. The intrinsic connection between their identities as both religious figures and childfree women make the *nadītum* priestesses a particularly interesting example of divinity distinctively enabling the disruption of gender norms.

Uniquely, religion appears to have permitted the destabilization of firmly established gender norms in the patriarchal society of ancient Mesopotamia. With both goddesses and their worshippers defying gender roles, divinity clearly played a significant part in one's ability to diverge from expected patriarchal standards. Perhaps it is divinity's inherent separation from humanity that allowed for such fluidity and defiance. With gender existing as a human-made, socially constructed idea, deities, who live outside the realm of human beings, can thus also exist outside its accompanying social restrictions. Women, as people also arguably existing "outside" the spheres of men, foster a particularly unique relationship with the divine. Scribal schools, such as that at House F, were spaces in which this fascinating concept of religion-connected agency for women occurred. Not only did these schools possibly present a path for some elite women to gain literacy and education for religious careers, but they were also spaces in which people studied texts depicting nuanced gender-nonconformity and divine femininity.

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ISAC MEMBER EVENTS

Screening and Discussion with Gil Stein: Afghan Mobile Museum Outreach Project

Wednesday, April 10, 6:00 pm Central

Breasted Hall and LaSalle Banks Room

Join us for a screening of a documentary about the Afghan Mobile Museum Outreach Project in Breasted Hall. Following the screening we will move downstairs for a conversational discussion with Prof. Gil Stein, the director of the Chicago Center for Cultural Heritage Preservation (3CHP), about the Mobile Museum Outreach Project as well as the Center's other preservation work in Afghanistan and beyond.

The Mobile Museum Outreach Project was a collaboration with the National Museum of Afghanistan (NMA) to implement an educational outreach program designed to raise awareness among high school students of the NMA's important collections through in-class presentations in boys' and girls' high schools and orphanages in the six largest cities across Afghanistan: Kabul, Herat, Mazar-i Sharif, Bamiyan, Kandahar, and Jalalabad. bit.ly/48AXhDG

Film Series

Our "Movement and Landscape in Iranian Cinema" member film series is continuing through June 2024. Upcoming screenings include:

Friday, April 19
The Wind Will Carry Us by Abbas Kiarostami
bit.ly/3wzXWYl

Friday, May 10
Where is the Friend's House by Abbas Kiarostami
bit.ly/49uYPjF

Friday, June 21
Delbaran by Abolfazl Jalili
bit.ly/49BXzLk

Members' Preview: Pioneers of the Sky: Aerial Archaeology and the Black Desert

Wednesday, April 24, 5:00–7:00 pm Central

ISAC

Opening on April 25, 2024, the ISAC Museum special exhibition *Pioneers of the Sky: Aerial Archaeology and the Black Desert* will present the history of aerial photography and its application to the archaeology of West Asia. Since the 1920s, ISAC scholars have been visionaries in the field, experimenting with balloons, kites, airplanes, drones, and satellite imagery in their efforts to document archaeological sites and vast landscapes from above. The exhibition concludes with a focus on the Black Desert of Jordan, sharing with the public previously unpublished snapshots and video footage of this "archaeological paradise."

Members are invited to join us on Wednesday, April 24, from 5:00 to 7:00 pm, for a special preview of the exhibition with supplemental programming by ISAC scholars. bit.ly/4bMDxzC

Museum Collection Storage Tour

Tuesday, May 21, 6:00 pm Central

ISAC

The ISAC Museum has over 350,000 objects in its collection, but only about 10 percent can be displayed at any moment. Objects that live "behind the scenes" are studied, incorporated in educational programs, and occasionally sent out on loan. Museum registrars manage all this, keeping detailed inventories to track the objects, in addition to working on the collection's database system and photographing objects.

Join Helen McDonald, ISAC Museum registrar, for a special, behind-the-scenes tour to learn more about her work, see the Museum's collection storage area, and view a selection of her favorite objects not currently on view. Due to the nature of this event, capacity is limited to 12 people and registration is required. bit.ly/3IGNH7w

ISAC LECTURES AND EVENTS

Lecture: Judah in the Shadow of the Assyrian Empire

Jeffrey Stackert, University of Chicago

Wednesday, April, 3, 7:00 pm Central

ISAC and streaming for members

ISAC welcomes the University of Chicago's Jeffery 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,* was the recipient of the 2010 John Templeton Award for Theological Promise.

Registration is for in-person attendance only. This lecture will stream live exclusively for ISAC members and will be posted to the ISAC YouTube channel in the future. Please refer to the latest Member Update email for the livestream link or email Brad at blenz@uchicago.edu. bit.ly/3ULV98I

Adult Education Class: Introduction to Demotic

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

8 weeks; first class Tuesday, May 7, 7:00 pm Central

Online

Explore the mysteries of the Book of Thoth and the secret scriptorium of the priesthood! Demotic refers to the language and cursive script used in ancient Egypt from circa 700 BCE to 300 CE. During this dynamic, multicultural period, a wealth of famous Demotic literature developed, including the Book of Thoth, the epics of Setna Khamwas and Inaros, tales of Imhotep, the Instruction of Ankhsheshonqy, the Demotic Book of Breathing, and many others. Parts of the Demotic tales known as the Dream of Nectanebo and the Myth of the Sun's Eye were translated into Greek and found their way into medieval literature, making the seemingly esoteric Demotic studies relevant to global history and literature. Over this eight-week course, students will begin their journey in Demotic studies by learning Demotic signs, the mechanics of the script, words, and grammatical constructions coupled with guided readings of Demotic texts, supplemented by manuscripts from the museum collections of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures. Students can expect to learn over 100 signs, 200 words, the most important grammatical constructions fundamental to Demotic, and strategies for independent study to continue their learning journey after

the class. There are no prerequisites for this course. Previous experience studying Egyptian hieroglyphs, hieratic, or Late Egyptian will be helpful, but it is not a requirement. This is a rare opportunity to gain in-depth experience at one of the world's leading centers for Demotic studies, with a phase of the language rarely studied outside the university classroom. All class sessions will be recorded and available to students to pursue at their own pace. bit.ly/3OUFvUV

Lecture: Christian Egypt and Its Pagan Past: Perspectives on Pharaonic Civilization from Coptic Magic

Korshi Dosoo, Julius Maximilian University, Würzburg

Wednesday, May 8, 7:00 pm Central

ISAC and streaming for members

Join us on the second Wednesday of the month 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.

Registration is for in-person attendance only. This lecture will stream live exclusively for ISAC members and will be posted to the ISAC YouTube channel in the future. Please refer to the latest Member Update email for the livestream link or email Brad at blenz@uchicago.edu. bit.ly/48rE339

Lecture: Daniel Schwemer, Julius Maximilian University, Würzburg

Wednesday, June 5, 7:00 pm Central

ISAC and streaming for members

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*.

Registration is for in-person attendance only. This lecture will stream live exclusively for ISAC members and will be posted to the ISAC YouTube channel in the future. Please refer to the latest Member Update email for the livestream link or email Brad at blenz@uchicago.edu. bit.ly/49HZMVw

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT
GEORGE SUNDELL
by Shirlee Hoffman

This month we interview George Sundell, a volunteer who has used his skills to contribute to a key ISAC project—the Diyala Database—for more than twenty years. Many of us frequently use the database, regularly mining it for content for our social media pages.

As it had been more than ten years since we previously interviewed George, who was the very first subject of a Volunteer Spotlight (in the Winter 2012 issue of *News & Notes*, available on the ISAC website), we decided to check in with him once again. I was delighted and intrigued, since I myself had never met George in the ten years I've been a volunteer docent. I'm guessing you will be delighted, too, when you read about the important technical projects he has worked on over the years.

How did you become interested in volunteering at the Institute? How long have you been a volunteer?

I had a referral to meet with McGuire Gibson the week after I retired in November 2000, from my brother and his wife who had met Mac at a social meeting. Mac had suggested I get in touch if I was interested in archaeological database work. He had a specific project in mind. We discussed my background—I had been a corporate data architect at AT&T doing data models, consulting with projects seeking technical assistance, and so on—and he asked me to take on the database design and implementation work for the Diyala Project, one of the most important excavation projects ever undertaken in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq).

Did you have any interest or training in the ancient Near East?

Not at the time I started. However, I had done digs in North America and one in England. I had taken courses at Indiana University on North American archaeology. I found that the recording and digging experience really helped in my work for Mac, although I had real problems with the artifact categories when I started, given that my previous archaeological experience and education were oriented toward North American archaeology. The Near Eastern pottery types, seals and seal impressions, and so on were "new territory." Grad students helped me get up to speed.

What have you done at ISAC since you became a volunteer? What do you do now?

I started working with Clemens Reichel and the Diyala Project to document and publish online, for the first time, all archaeological materials and supporting documentation (e.g., locus cards, object cards, field maps) from the Diyala Expedition, including all the artifacts previously unpublished from the 1930s. The work was financed, in part, by two National Endowment for the Humanities grants. I did the database design work and created the website (diyalaproject.uchicago.edu). Clemens, Mike Schmitt, and Ali Witsel—all PhD candidates at the time—along with several others worked to prepare information to be loaded into the database. Subsequently, Clemens was named to a position at the University of Toronto. While I worked remotely with him for a number of years, for the past seven or eight years I've worked independently. Later, Roberta Schaffner also helped me with scanning and data-entry work.

I also was a member of the committee tasked by Gil Stein with selecting a product for digitizing ISAC collections, archives, and so on. The committee was asked to evaluate and recommend a database product to be used to integrate and support ISAC-wide information and put it online. That product (Ke Mu) is what everyone uses internally and on ISAC's website. It has been years in the making, including preparing data, loading it, and cross-linking between data classes. I also assisted Helen McDonald and Susan Allison in preparing a controlled vocabulary for cataloging as information was loaded. Foy Scalf is the guru of that product at ISAC.

In recent years, my usual practice has been to work one day a week on-site at ISAC and remotely another day, from home. I've kept up to date in my professional skills through membership in the Computer Society and by attending workshops and online courses. I'm still working on Diyala; in fact, a new release will be issued in early April.

What do you particularly like about being a volunteer?

The challenge of solving problems and the enjoyment of working within a team of great people.

What would you say to someone who is thinking of volunteering at ISAC (when that again becomes possible)?

Get involved! I am not a person to talk about docent work, but the support of research work can be engrossing, challenging, and so rewarding.

REMEMBERING
DONALD WHITCOMB
by Tasha Vorderstrasse

It is rare today that someone is as transformative for an academic field as Donald Whitcomb was during his career. He literally redefined the discipline of Islamic archaeology and established what it was moving forward into the twenty-first century. The field of Islamic archaeology would not be what it is today without him and his scholarship. He not only conducted important excavations and wrote articles about them but also, importantly, made Islamic archaeology a field of study for his many students in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. Many students, this author included, ended up doing a PhD in Islamic archaeology after attending one of his classes, not realizing until then that it was actually an area of study in which one could specialize.

Don's career in Islamic archaeology began in the 1970s, specifically focusing on Iran. As is the case for many people working in Islamic archaeology, he began with a study of the earlier periods. He wrote his master's thesis, "The Proto-Elamite Period at Tall-i Ghazir, Iran," at the University of Georgia in 1971. In 1972, he began his PhD at the University of Chicago in the Department of Anthropology, working with Robert McCormick Adams. In 1979, he completed his PhD dissertation, "Trade and Tradition in Southern Iran." An outgrowth of this work was his publication in 1985 of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's excavations at the site of Qasr-i Abu Nasr during the 1930s, in his monograph *Before the Roses and Nightingales: Excavations at Qasr-i Abu Nasr, Old Shiraz.* An interest in past excavations and reinterpreting them would be an important aspect of his work; the most notable old excavation was the 1934–48 work at the site of Khirbet el-Mafjar, which he reassessed in his article "Khirbet el-Mafjar Reconsidered: The Ceramic Evidence," published in *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 271 (1988): 51–67. Another important study that reassessed old excavations examined the site of Istakhr in Iran, excavated by Herzfeld and Schmidt in the 1930s: "The City of Istakhr and the Marvdasht Plain," published in 1979.

Don conducted excavations throughout West Asia and North Africa, working in many countries including Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Palestine, and Israel. It allowed him to expand his interest in the development of the early Islamic city, as well as ports and trade. His excavations at the site of Aqaba in Jordan between 1986 and 1995 exemplify both of these interests, since they allowed him to examine the development of the Islamic city as well as evidence for Red Sea trade. He also codirected, with Janet Johnson, the excavations at the port of Quseir al-Qadim on the Red Sea in 1978, 1980, and 1982. His interest in the archaeology of Egypt was further developed by research on the pottery found in Peter Grossmann's work at a medieval church at Luxor Temple, and then on the Chicago Luxor Medieval Project in 1985–1986/87 with Janet Johnson. Don moved on from Egypt and Jordan to investigate the development of early Islamic cities in Syria, focusing on the site of Hadir Qinnasrin, located to the south of Aleppo. He began a survey with limited excavations in 1998, followed by work in 1999 and further excavations in 2000.

Starting in 2010, he returned to the field, this time having the opportunity to excavate at the site of Khirbet el-Mafjar in Palestine, which had been a focus of his earlier work and where he was codirector of the excavations together with Hamdan Taha, director of the Department of Antiquities. The excavations continued through 2015. A number of articles were produced, but the most notable publication was the magnificently illustrated 2010 book on Khirbet el-Mafjar's impressive mosaics, *The Mosaics of Khirbet el-Mafjar: Hisham's Palace.* Then, in 2018, Don moved on to the site of Khirbet al-Kerak, which had been excavated by ISAC in the 1950s. In 2002, Don suggested that it was the early Islamic palace of Sinnabra in a short article, "Khirbet al-Kerak Identified with Sinnabra," published in *Al-'Usur al-Wusta: The Bulletin of the Middle East Medievalists* 14: 1–6. He worked at the site with Tawfiq Da'adli and Rafi Greenberg and again in 2019.

As one can see from this short overview, Donald Whitcomb had a major impact on the field of Islamic archaeology in general and transformed our appreciation for and understanding of the development of Islamic cities in particular. His many publications will continue to be invaluable reference works for anyone working in Islamic archaeology, and they will doubtless continue to inspire new generations of students for years to come.

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