For Immediate Release

The Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures Museum (ISAC Museum) on the campus of the University of Chicago opens a new special exhibition that examines Babylonian education and culture, as well as objects that reflect school life in ancient Nippur.

In 1740 BCE in Babylonia, students from across the neighborhood gathered in a modest house in Nippur, a Mesopotamian city in present-day southern Iraq, to learn how to read and write the complex cuneiform script, while more advanced students studied topics like mathematics, religion, and law. The goal of their education was to gain the knowledge, skills, and character traits necessary to become successful scribes working for the king, temples, and local authorities. In 1951–1952, the Joint Expedition to Nippur of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures (ISAC) at the University of Chicago and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology discovered the remains of this school. In 2023, ISAC invites visitors to follow the journey of these ancient students in Nippur by entering the Edubba’a, a scribal school, during the special exhibition: Back to School in Babylonia.

This special exhibition is 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 Ware.

It reunites objects excavated at Nippur 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, will be represented by plaster casts.

This free special exhibition runs from September 21, 2023, through March 24, 2024, at the ISAC Museum.
The Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures Museum  
The University of Chicago  
Back to School in Babylonia

Tablet inscribed with a Babylonian exercise sheet  
Old Babylonian Period  
Iraq, Nippur  
ISACM A30276  
Photo by Danielle Levy

Tablet inscribed with a story about Babylonian student life  
Old Babylonian Period  
Iraq, Nippur  
ISACM A30217  
Photo by Danielle Levy

Tablet with the bite marks of a bored student  
Old Babylonian Period  
Iraq, Nippur  
Penn Museum, N5326B  
Photo courtesy of the Penn Museum and CDLI

Clay lion plaque used as a wall decoration in the school  
Old Babylonian Period  
Iraq, Nippur  
Penn Museum UM 53-11-05 (3N-340)  
Photo courtesy of the Penn Museum