

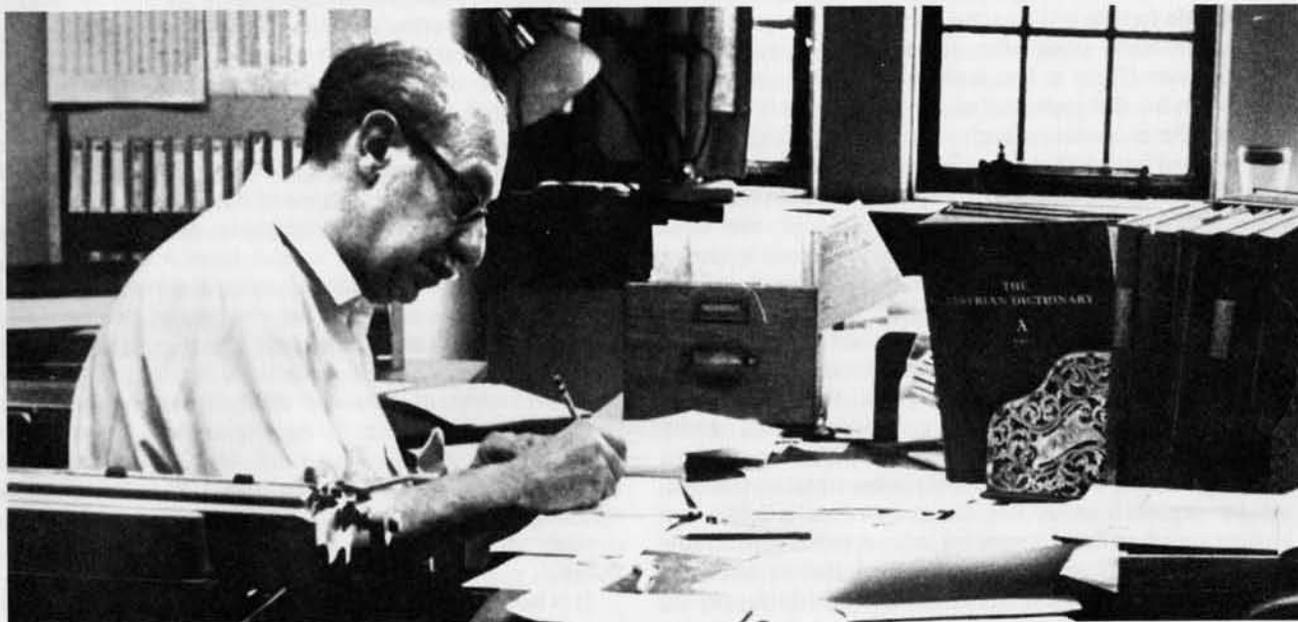
# News & Notes

The Oriental Institute

No. 10: October, 1974

Issued confidentially to members and friends

Not for publication



A. LEO OPPENHEIM, *John A. Wilson Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of Oriental Studies.*

We were deeply saddened by the death of Dr. A. Leo Oppenheim on July 21 at the age of 70. A biographical memoir by Dr. John A. Brinkman will appear in a future *News & Notes*.

Get in touch with Mrs. David Maher (phone 753-2573 or 753-2471, or write her at the Institute for any of the following activities:

★ The next Members' Course will begin on Monday, February 10, 1975. *Egyptian Hieroglyphs*, a course in reading ancient Egyptian, will be offered by David P. Silverman, degree candidate in Egyptology. The class will meet Mondays 10-11:30 a.m. and be repeated Tuesdays 5:30-7 p.m. Members who enroll may come to either or both sessions. The class will meet for eight weeks; tuition is \$30.00 (\$45.00 for non-members to include membership in the Oriental Institute).

★ A trip to archeological sites in Turkey will be sponsored by the Oriental Institute May 7 to May 29, 1975. Originally a 2-week trip was planned, but a 3-week tour proves to be more economical. The tour, led by Paul Zimansky, degree candidate in Anatolian archeology, will visit Ankara, Hattusas, Gordium, Side, Aphrodisias, Ephesus, Sardis, Pergamum, Troy, Istanbul, and other sites.

★ A docent training course to prepare volunteers as museum guides will be offered in the spring. Meanwhile, volunteers are needed now to staff the Suq, our museum gift shop. Any members who can offer three hours a week, morning or afternoon, should call Mrs. Maher. No experience necessary, on-the-job training will be provided!

The Nimrud Assyrian reliefs have arrived. We are very grateful to the members who contributed generously to help us bring the reliefs from London. All the expenses, however, have not been met and we would appreciate additional assistance.

## FOOTNOTES IN CLAY

by Miguel Civil

The cuneiform tablets found in Mesopotamia proper are, with extremely rare exceptions, written in only two languages: Sumerian or Akkadian. The first had become an extinct language by 2000 B.C. or earlier, the second perhaps as early as the 7th century B.C. Both, however, survived as learned languages used in religious and technical texts as well as in legal and administrative documents, a situation comparable to that of Latin, used for similar purposes more than a thousand years after Rome had disappeared as a world power. Only a few families seem to have devoted themselves to the preservation of the old cuneiform texts through the centuries, often under the crown's patronage, as witnessed by the libraries collected by Tiglath-Pileser I in Assur (1115-1077) and Assurbanipal in Nineveh (668-627). As Sumerian and Akkadian became more and more unfamiliar, a new genre of texts appeared: the commentaries, which explain and clarify the old texts. These commentaries are in a sense the equivalent of the footnotes and remarks that accompany modern editions of the Greek and Latin authors. The commentaries are presented as the teaching of the masters, and explain difficult words by their synonyms or illustrate their use by quotations from the great literary works such as the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Poem of the Creation, among others. The later commentaries add allegorical explanations cutting the words into syllables and giving to each syllable a meaning related to the general subject of the commented text. This method, illustrated below, is known also in the commentaries to the Scriptures in the Rabbinic schools and among the early Church Fathers.

During the eleventh campaign of excavations in Nippur, directed by McGuire Gibson during the winter of 1973, we were fortunate enough to unearth two outstanding samples of this scholarly activity of the Mesopotamian scribes. According to the subscripts at the end of the tablets, the commentaries belong to Enlil-kašir, son of Enlil-shuma-ibni. He was a *kalu*-priest of Enlil and a scholar who claimed as his ancestor the legendary master Lu-dumu-nunna (one of whose sons, Ibni-Marduk, is credited with the authorship of the "Fable of the Fox"). The importance of Enlil-kašir's collection of commentaries is confirmed by the finding in Uruk, some 100 kilometers southeast of Nippur, of a religious-astrological commentary copied from a Nippur tablet belonging to Enlil-kašir.

The smaller of the two tablets found in Nippur com-

ments on one of the classic main manuals of Mesopotamian medicine; it is the 24th "chapter" of the commentary. (The 22nd was discovered last century at Sippar.) The text of our section deals with diseases of the genito-urinary system. Except for some astrological allusions, the master limits himself to explaining difficult words. Thus we are told that the medicinal plant *nusabu* is just like the plant *kukkanitu* but with "five leaves," and that the technical term *mušu* refers to a constriction, and so on.

The larger tablet is more imaginative. It explains an incantation used to help a woman having difficulties in childbirth. The incantation is known from texts found in Assur and Nineveh and goes back to the Old Babylonian Period. Alongside straight explanations of obsolete words, the master introduces allegorical etymologies: *gi en-bar-ban-da*, for instance, actually means "a reed from a small swamp," used in the magic rites accompanying the recitation of the incantation. But to explain the presence of this particular word in the text, the master cuts it into syllables and, by forcing their meaning in Sumerian, obtains *gi* = woman, *bar* = to come out, *ban-da* = child; *en* apparently did not readily lend itself to a fitting explanation and was conveniently disregarded. The word for "shell (of a water snail)" is *na* followed by a cuneiform sign made up of the sign *SHA* with an *A* inside it. That is explained as *na* = the coming out of the seed, *A* = son which is inside *SHA* = womb.

It is not always easy to separate the grain from the chaff, but these commentaries contain precious philological material to improve our understanding of Mesopotamian technical literature. Some indication of the importance of these particular tablets is the fact that they have already been published in a scholarly edition—less than a year and a half after they were discovered. The information contained in the commentaries can now enrich the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* and similar publications. This is a striking example of how the Institute's seemingly disparate research projects and field expeditions complement each other.

*Dr. Civil is Professor of Sumerology in the Oriental Institute, and Associate Editor of the CAD. He served as epigrapher to the Nippur Expedition in its eleventh season (1973), and his edition of the commentaries appears in the July, 1974 issue of the Journal of Near Eastern Studies.*



*The front and back of the smaller of the two medical commentaries. The colophon stating the ownership of the tablet appears below the lines on the reverse. Rarely is a tablet found which is so perfectly preserved. This illustration is actual size.*

## A MISPLACED LETTER TO THE DEAD

by Edward F. Wente

Sixteen years ago while passing through the offices of the Cairo Museum, I encountered an antiquities dealer in the process of having a number of pieces approved for export. One of the items immediately struck my attention—a small rectangular limestone tablet or stele, about a foot high, with an unpretentious painted scene of a man making an offering. On the reverse side were seven vertical lines of an ink inscription in the hieratic (cursive) script. The unidentified dealer who had submitted this little stele for an export permit would not divulge to me the name of its purchaser, except that I was led to believe that it was on its way to the States. I asked the dealer if I might make a hand-copy of the text since I lacked a camera at the time. Not wishing to have the museum authorities think that this was an important piece, the dealer gave me permission but told me to be quick about it. So I set about making a hieroglyphic transcription of the hieratic text with an occasional sketch of a hieratic sign when there was some doubt about the correct hieroglyphic transcription. It was a very rapidly made copy, and my hope sixteen years ago was that the stele would eventually turn up in the States, where some scholar more competent than myself might undertake the publication of the object, the reverse side of which contained nothing other than a letter to the dead of the First Intermediate Period that preceded the Middle Kingdom. It was written by a man to a dead woman, probably his wife, and concluded with an additional communication from the woman's brother.

So far neither hide nor hair has been seen of this object, which presumably now lies tucked away in someone's private collection. Since I have been preparing an anthology of ancient Egyptian letters, I turned my attention after these many years to my initial efforts of 1958. My old transcription is not entirely without its uncertainties, but I believe that the following tentative translation is essentially correct. The letter to a dead woman reads:

Communication by Merirtyfy to Nebetiotef: How are you now that the West is taking care of your desires? Now I am your beloved upon earth. Fight on my behalf and intercede on behalf of my name. I have not garbled a spell before you when I perpetuated your name upon earth. Remove the infirmity of my body. Please become a spirit before my eyes that I may see you fighting on my behalf in a dream. I will (then) deposit offerings for you when the sun has risen and outfit for you your offering-slab.

Communication by Khuaper to his sister: . . . I have not garbled a spell before you, nor have I withheld offerings from you. Rather I have supported (?). . . Fight on my behalf and fight on behalf of my wife and children.

There are just over a dozen letters to the dead that have survived from ancient Egypt on a variety of materials: a piece of linen, papyrus, pottery, and now a limestone stele. Such items would normally be deposited at the offering place connected with the tomb by a relative wishing to communicate with the deceased's spirit. Most such letters

come from the First Intermediate Period as does this stele, which bears some paleographical similarities to a hieratic letter to the dead inscribed on a jar stand now on exhibit in our Egyptian gallery.

The letter on the lost stele resembles others of its kind in speaking in terms of a litigation in the netherworld, where the deceased lady is asked to fight and intercede on the writer's behalf. Significantly these two phrases are coupled in just such a legalistic context in Chapter One of the Book of the Dead, which has a forerunner in an older Coffin Text spell. It is believed that many spells of the Book of the Dead and of the Coffin Texts were composed during the Herakleopolitan phase (Dynasty 9/10) of the First Intermediate Period; and, if we may assume that the writer of this letter was acquainted with some of the phraseology of such mortuary literature, we might posit a dating of this letter to the Herakleopolitan period or to Dynasty 11, when Herakleopolitan religious texts became utilized in the south of Egypt following the reunification of the kingdom under the great Mentuhotep II. The formula used to introduce the words of each of the two writers of the letter is also found in the Hekanakhte letters of late Dynasty 11 and provides a further criterion for assigning the letter to the second half of the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2000 B.C.).

Perhaps what is the most extraordinary thing about this letter to the dead is what I understand to be a very ancient reference to the incubation of dreams. From Egypt there are papyri which provide us with prognostic interpretations of various sorts of dreams that an individual might chance to have, but so far it has been only from the Hellenistic period that the earliest positive evidence exists for the incubation of dreams in Egypt, a process whereby an individual passes the night in a temple seeking to have a specific revelation through a dream. Some have even thought that this was not a practice indigenous to Egypt but was of Hellenistic origin. What the text of the stele seems to suggest is that the petitioner intends to pass the night in the tomb chapel hoping to see in a dream the ghost of his dead wife contending on his behalf in the netherworld tribunal, whereupon in the morning he would reward the dead lady with suitable offerings.

Somewhat allied to the letters of the dead are letters to the gods, especially those to the god Thoth from Hermopolis, demotic examples of which Professor Hughes has been interested in and written about. Both types give us a glimpse into the personal problems and religious feelings of the ancient Egyptian, something that is harder to determine from the more imposing monuments, for which it might have been a bit more difficult to get an export permit. Hopefully the lost stele will make itself known wherever it may be.

*Dr. Wente is Professor of Egyptology in the Oriental Institute and a former Field Director of the Epigraphic Survey.*

# 4 THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE

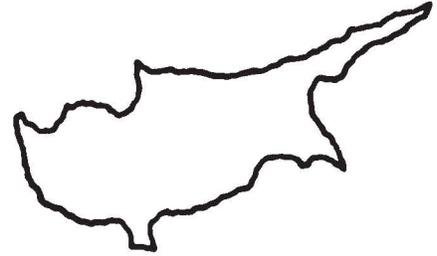
*cordially invites you  
to attend a lecture*

**“EXCAVATIONS AT IDALION, CYPRUS”**

by

**Lawrence E. Stager**

The Oriental Institute



**Wednesday, November 6, 1974**

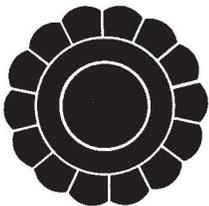
**8:30 p.m.**

The James Henry Breasted Lecture Hall  
1155 East 58th Street

Admission is free. Museum Halls and The Suq will be open one hour  
before the lecture.

*(The Quadrangle Club, 1155 East 57th Street, will be open to Oriental  
Institute members who wish to make dinner reservations. Please call  
Mrs. Schlender, 493-8601. Please remember that the privilege of the use  
of the dining room at the Quadrangle Club is a courtesy extended to  
members of the Oriental Institute only on nights when there is an Ori-  
ental Institute lecture.)*

COMING EVENT: Sunday, December 8, 1974, “Aus der Geschichte der Menschheit,” film of the work of the German  
Institute in the Near East.



**The Oriental Institute**

The University of Chicago

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**FIRST CLASS**