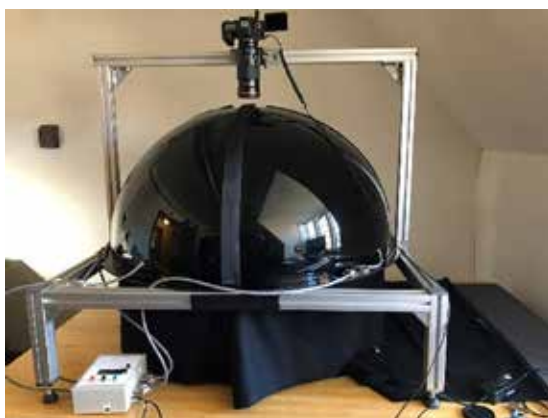


TABLET COLLECTION

SUSANNE PAULUS

Susanne Paulus wants to start this report with a heartfelt thank you to our donors Al Liventals, Abhay Parekh, and Annette Youngberg, whose generous support made our work possible. In addition, we received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the College Center for Research and Fellowships.

During this year, COVID-19 still made a severe impact on our research and work with the tablet collection. In October, the University allowed part of the collection team to return to work. We followed the University's health pact, which meant that some continued to work remotely, while others, following strict guidelines, could work with the objects in person. We navigated challenges such as limiting the number of people per room, new ways to access the facilities and the tablets,



Figures 1-4. The RTI dome came in an enormous aluminum crate. Knut Boehmer built the dome from scratch.

and wearing gloves to protect the objects and ourselves. We made good progress in digitization and the XRF project and supported more researchers and their projects than ever before.

Our most substantial update was the arrival of the Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) dome. The production of the dome (built by Custom Imaging of the University of Southampton, U.K.) was severely delayed due to COVID-19. Typically, Prof. Kirk Martinez, the dome's developer, would have delivered and installed the dome himself. As we did not want to delay delivery any further, however, we decided that Martinez would ship the dome, and Paulus would assemble it herself with our IT manager Knut Boehmer. The dome arrived safely in Chicago in October, and Boehmer and Paulus spent many hours building, adjusting, and calibrating the unit with remote help from Martinez. While this process was certainly slower, we learned a lot about the dome's mechanics and inner workings—knowledge that will be helpful when we move the dome in the future.

Since our hours in the OI were limited, we spent most of November getting accustomed to the dome, camera, and software and to calibrating it. At the end of November, we had a successful training workshop with Klaus Wagensohn from the Yale Babylonian Collection.

To adhere to the strict distancing rules, we split the digitization work between the whole team: Nicole Brandt took over the coordination of tablet movement and worked closely with our registrar, Helen McDonald. Over the year, she completed 1,157 tablet moves, which shows how busy the collection team kept during this difficult time. Clara Mikhail focused on photography and developed excellent skills in putting our tablets in the best possible light. Based on the quality of her work and the better equipment, we moved from scanning tablets to using photographs, which allows for better resolution. Joshua (Eyshe) Beirich joined the team this year and quickly became a specialist on the RTI dome; he mastered the complex settings and postproduction. His RTI images were especially useful to support tablets in an educational context, since students had no access to the originals. "Is there an RTI?" quickly became a standard request in classes. Finally, Madeline Ouimet worked remotely from Wisconsin and transformed our images into composites that we published for everyone via the OI's integrated database (IDB). In addition, she augmented our database with valuable information about the tablets. Over the period of the lockdown we digitized 740 tablets. All three of our undergraduate researchers presented their work at the University Undergraduate Research Symposium in May.

We began a new project—digitizing and cataloging the tablets excavated by the OI at Nippur. These tablets cover more than two millennia and contain essential information about literature, religion, schooling, and daily life in this religious center. As a first step, Colton Siegmund, assistant curator of the collection, added the excavation file cards to provide information about the tablets. Clara Mikhail stayed on over the summer and digitized tablets from the third season. Many of the tablets from Nippur featured in my two-quarter sequence on education in Nippur. In this new class, we followed the journey of scribal students from Nippur from their first elementary exercises through lexical lists, model contracts, and proverbs to advanced literary texts.

We continued the X-ray fluorescence analysis, which received a massive boost with the arrival of a new Bruker 5g tracer. After getting socially distanced but personal security training on the latest equipment in conservation, Siegmund and I started to explore the potential of the new machine. It comes with a unique calibration that allows excellent quantitative and qualitative analysis of our tablets' clays. Fun fact: The calibration "mudrock" was initially developed for the oil industry, but is also helpful for cuneiform tablets because they come from the same geological environment. A camera in the tracer allows the exact placement of the sample, which helps us avoid air pockets. Also, the tracer is much more reliable for lighter elements such as aluminum, chloride, and potassium, which play an essential role in clay sourcing. Siegmund's work allowed us to make good use of the tracer, and we have now almost concluded experiments for our clay sourcing research. In a first step,

we (re)ran tablets from securely excavated contexts and then turned to unprovenanced tablets to see whether we can attribute their findspots. We will wrap up our work in the next academic year and present our final results.

As no researchers could come to the OI, we had a flurry of requests to support them with photos and research images. Research topics ranged from sealings of the Ur III period to school and scientific texts to economic and legal documents. This year we supported the work of Nadia Ait Said-Ghanem (School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, U.K.), Odette Boivin (Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York), Enrique Jiménez (Ludwig Maximilian University [LMU] of Munich, Germany), Yujeong (Erin) Lee (Earlham College, Richmond, Indiana), Gianni Marchesi (University of Bologna, Italy), Rudi Mayr (Independent Researcher, U.S.), Sara Milstein (University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada), David Musgrave (Hebrew Union College), Toni Mitto and Jamie Novotny (LMU Munich, Germany), Jeremiah Peterson (University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia), Nicholas Postgate (University of Cambridge, U.K.), Gabriella Spada (Sapienza, Rome, Italy), Marten Stol (Leiden University, Netherlands), Lorenzo Verderame (Sapienza, Rome, Italy), and Klaus Wagensonner (Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut).
