

# TABLET COLLECTION AND NIPPUR TABLET PROJECT

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I want to start this annual report with a heartfelt thank-you to our donors Al Liventals, Abhay Parekh, Terry Friedman, and Annette Youngberg, whose generous support made the work of the Tablet Collection possible. In addition, we received funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the University of Chicago's College Center for Research and Fellowships. Special thanks as well to the OI Museum team, especially Laura D'Alessandro and Alison Whyte in Conservation and Helen McDonald and Susan Allison in Registration, for their support of our work. None of the projects described below would have been possible without the dedicated work of the members of the Tablet Collection team—Colton Siegmund (assistant curator, research support, and portable X-ray fluorescence), Marta Diaz Herrera (cataloging, Nippur Tablet Project), C Mikhail (photography, reflectance transformation imaging, and post-processing), and Madeline Ouimet (digitization and archaeological research)—all of whom are also working on the upcoming exhibition (see below).

In 2020–21, we focused on acquiring and familiarizing ourselves with new technology and methods in studying and digitizing cuneiform tablets. This year, we used that technology and knowledge to start two new projects, the Nippur Tablet Project and the exhibition *Back to School in Babylonia*.

The goal of the Nippur Tablet Project is to digitize, catalog, study, and ultimately publish in collaboration with scholars worldwide the many tablets in the OI's collections from the ancient site of Nippur. The OI has been excavating at Nippur since 1948, and most seasons have yielded a few to several hundred tablets. The OI houses around a thousand tablets from Nippur, covering all periods and genres. Other tablets from the excavations are in the Iraq Museum in Baghdad and the Penn Museum in Philadelphia, but the OI has plaster casts and information about them.

While some of the tablets have been published, many are still awaiting publication. As a first step, we systematically digitize and catalog each tablet, adding information from the excavation records and identifying and describing the tablet's period, genre, and content. We also research any available publications on the tablet. All this information is added to the integrated database and is freely available online. In addition, we add high-resolution photographs from all angles (see fig. 1) and reflectance transformation imaging (RTI) to the database. For the tablets currently in the Iraq Museum, we are collaborating with the Electronic



Figure 1. Image of an intriguing cone model found in Nippur (A30194).

Babylonian Literature Project led by Enrique Jiménez. During this first year, we completed all 197 objects from the third season at Nippur and made significant progress on the tablets from the second season. This work has already sparked new scholarly interest in our collections. It has also made the upcoming exhibition possible, as most of the tablets from the third season come from the scribal school(s) in Nippur.

The special exhibition *Back to School in Babylonia* is scheduled to open in fall 2023. It will be the OI's first significant show focusing on material from the Tablet Collection, specifically the tablets excavated in House F, a private school in Nippur. The goal is to introduce visitors to scribal education in ancient Mesopotamia, tracing school education from the earliest exercises to mastery. The show addresses who went to school, what and how students learned, and where they went afterward. It is accessible to different audiences through the topic of schoolchildren, and its design will cater to the demands of K–12 school groups and families, University of Chicago college students, and general OI Museum visitors.

The exhibition will present many tablets about Mesopotamian education for the first time, including student–teacher exercises illustrating how students learned to write, mathematical exercises, and famous literary texts taught in school (fig. 2). Visitors will be able to experience the archaeological remains of ancient schools and learn about Mesopotamian students' daily struggles. A catalog written by specialists, from the OI and around the world, will accompany the show. While the authors are writing their essays, we are busy selecting and researching objects for the exhibition and establishing the narrative that will guide its visitors.

In addition to our research projects, we supported research on the tablets in our collection with information, photos and RTI, and some in-person visits. Scholars working with our collection included Lara Bampfield (Oxford University), Paul Delnero (John Hopkins University), Craig Anthony Harris (University of Vienna, Austria), Enrique Jiménez (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany), Ekatarina Markina (Higher School of Economics, Moscow), David Musgrave (Hebrew Union College), John Nielsen (Bradley University), Joachim Oelsner (University of Jena, Germany), Jim Ritter (Sorbonne University, Paris) and Klaus Wagensohnner (Yale University). We also supported a project by PBS/NOVA and assistant professor John Wee on cuneiform mathematics. As usual, professors requested tablets for classes, including a course on cuneiform epigraphy that trains our students to handle and copy cuneiform.



Figure 2. Detail of a student–teacher exercise. The student erased their portion to practice again.