

TABLET COLLECTION AND NIPPUR TABLET PROJECT

SUSANNE PAULUS, WITH MARTA DÍAZ HERRERA,
JANE GORDON, DANIELLE LEVY, MADELINE OUIMET,
AND RYAN WINTERS

The Tablet Collection team would like to start this annual report by expressing its gratitude to its donors, especially Deborah and Philip Halpern, Malda and Aldis Liventals, and Catherine A. Novotny. The Tablet Collection also received generous support from the College Center for Research and Fellowships and UChicago Grad.

Four major elements dominated this year's research at the Tablet Collection and Nippur Tablet Project: the exhibition *Back to School in Babylonia*, cataloging the main collection, the Nippur Tablet Project, and supporting research and education. Some of the work described here includes activities that occurred in 2022–23.

BACK TO SCHOOL IN BABYLONIA

The exhibition *Back to School in Babylonia* was the dominant project of the Tablet Collection team. The exhibition team included Marta Díaz Herrera (assistant curator, Nippur Tablet Project), Jane Gordon (graduate researcher), Danielle Levy (photographer), Madeline Ouimet (assistant curator), Colton Siegmund (former assistant curator), and Ryan D. Winters (postdoctoral researcher), as well as interns and former team members Pallas Eible Hargro, C Mikhail, Carter Rote, and Sarah M. Ware in close cooperation with the staff of the ISAC Museum and Archives, the Museum Shop, and the Research Archives (see Museum and Research Archives reports).

The goals of the exhibition were to tell the story of the education of Babylonian schoolchildren around 1750 BCE in Nippur and to highlight the work of the Tablet Collection and the Nippur Tablet Project. The exhibition and its related publications, merchandise, and events were extremely successful. The ISAC Museum experienced a 30 percent growth in visitors and a similar growth in sales in the Museum Shop, including many international sales. Both the exhibition catalog and the children's book were well received among the academic and broader communities.

In preparation for the exhibition, which opened in September 2023, the team selected 126 objects, including loans from the Penn Museum; worked on design, layout, displays, narrative, and annotations with the team of the ISAC Museum; and created interactive and multisensory features, such as a video highlighting the production and recycling of a cuneiform tablet, audio recordings of Sumerian debates using the translations of assistant professor of Sumerology Jana Matuszak, and 3D prints of selected objects that allowed visitors to explore clay tablets and cuneiform through touch (fig. 1).

As a companion to the exhibition, a 480-page catalog with twenty-five chapters comprehensively covering all aspects of Babylonian education was published with contributions by internationally renowned scholars and University of Chicago graduate students (fig. 2). A field-defining aspect of this publication was a new way of depicting cuneiform tablets through aesthetically pleasing high-resolution photography (by Levy) and making them accessible through annotations (by Díaz Herrera). In the five concluding chapters,



Figure 1. Danielle Levy using 3D-printed objects in the exhibition to explain cuneiform writing. Photo by Susanne Paulus.

the team members presented the displayed objects in a narrative way, allowing the reader to relive the story of the exhibition.

Not just for a younger audience, the children’s activity book *The Adventures of Inanaka and Tuni* provides an introduction to the archaeology of Iraq, Babylonian scribal education, and life in the scribal quarters in Nippur. The beautiful and well-researched illustrations (by Ouimet; fig. 3) bring to life the story (by Gordon and Paulus) of the girl Inanaka and her dog, while activities allow readers to explore the cuneiform writing system in detail. The book was professionally typeset and designed by Ware, a University of Chicago College Center for Research and Fellowships summer intern.

The book and exhibition also influenced the Museum education course for K–12 students that the team developed in cooperation with Youth and Family Program manager Kate Hodge and her team. The class was taught to 308 students and informed two larger workshops in the fall and spring. Hodge commented, “Generally speaking, I think it was an excellent learning experience for myself and my students to really get to know cuneiform—it improved even general tours!” In addition, members of the Tablet Collection team filled two issues of the ISAC member magazine *News & Notes* with articles about various topics of scribal education.

Certainly contributing to the success of the exhibition was the continuous social media and



Figure 2. Contributing authors (from left to right) Susanne Paulus, Danielle Levy, Marta Díaz Herrera, Jane Gordon, Ryan Winters, and Madeline Ouimet celebrating the publication of the *Back to School in Babylonia* catalog. Photo by Danielle Levy.

outreach work of the team in cooperation with Continuing Education Program manager Tasha Vorderstrasse that included weekly posts from August to December 2023 and periodic posts from January to March 2024 written by team members, especially Rote and Gordon. These posts helped publicize the many outreach events organized in conjunction with the exhibition (fig. 4).

As for public programming, a broad monthly lecture program attracted a good audience with talks by Paulus on “The Aims of Babylonian Education”; Paul Delnero (Johns Hopkins) on “What Did You Learn in School Today?”; Matuszak on “Law and Morality in Sumerian Satirical Tales”; Eleanor Robson (University College London) on “Back to House F: Personal Reflections on 25 Years of Research on Old Babylonian Schooling”; and Gina Konstantopoulos (University of California at Los Angeles) on “Foremost among the Ghosts: The Role of Gilgamesh in Rituals and Incantations.” Each lecture was accompanied by a dedicated exhibition tour by one of the team members. Especially for families, we also organized a winter festival in cooperation with ISAC’s associate director of member programming Matt Welton featuring games, tours, and readings. A five-week adult education course taught by Díaz Herrera, Gordon, Ouimet,



Figure 3. Madeline Ouimet illustrating *The Adventures of Inanaka and Tuni*. Photo by Barbara Ouimet.

Figure 4. Sarah Ware, Danielle Levy, and Jane Gordon promoting the children’s book and Tuppi plushie during the Hyde Park Children’s Book Fair in October 2023. Photo by Susanne Paulus.





Figure 5. Marta Díaz Herrera giving a tour of the exhibition. Photo by Susanne Paulus.

Figure 6. Jane Gordon giving a lecture about Gilgameš and the exhibition to College students. Photo by Susanne Paulus.



Paulus, and PhD candidate Barbora Wichterlová invited participants to dive deeper into many aspects of Babylonian education.

As a special highlight of outreach work, many team members gave tours of the special exhibition to diverse audiences (fig. 5), including to the general public, ISAC members and donors, adults, and children. The exhibition welcomed first-year undergraduate students from the University of Chicago's Humanities Core classes "Readings in World Literature" and "Human Being and Citizen" (fig. 6), as well as graduate student groups from the university and from Northwestern University's classics department. Other groups included students from the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools; members of the American Research Center in Egypt, Field Museum, and South Suburban Archaeological Society; and many more. Altogether, the tours strengthened the visibility and presence of ISAC and the Tablet Collection in the public and university communities.

A significant impact was made by the merchandise created by Levy with contributions from many other team members. Their goal was to create attractive, fun, and tasteful merchandise that would be available in the Museum Shop during the exhibition and afterward. The products included two T-shirts with cuneiform script, socks bearing a quotation from the famous King Šulgi the runner, bookmarks with selected Mesopotamian deities, and a mug based on a seal in the ISAC collection. The swag enjoyed great popularity, but none more so than the first-ever ISAC plushie, the cuneiform tablet Tuppi. Once introduced on social media via ISAC's most popular post to date, Tuppi quickly rose to worldwide fame and raised awareness for ISAC and cuneiform studies, all while being incredibly cute (fig. 7).



Figure 7. Participants of the American Society of Overseas Research conference buying Tuppi at the Museum Shop. Photo by Susanne Paulus.

Last but certainly not least, the exhibition had an enduring academic impact on all members of the team. Undergraduates Levy and Ware presented their research on “Women and Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia through the Lens of Scribal Education” and “Tracing Literacy and the Literate: Scribal Education in Ancient Babylonia,” respectively, at the University of Chicago’s College Summer Institute Symposium in August 2023. Levy additionally presented two well-received posters at the College Center for Research and Fellowships Undergraduate Research Symposium in 2023 and 2024 and was selected to serve as a Student Marshal, one of the highest honors the university awards to undergraduate students. In a joint session of the Ancient Societies Workshop, Interdisciplinary Archaeology Workshop, and Middle East History and Theory Workshop, Gordon, Levy, and Ouimet reflected on the challenges of curation and communication, while Paulus did the same in an interview with Jon Taylor (British Museum) for the “Thin End of the Wedge” podcast. Gordon and Levy were also interviewed about the exhibition by Digital Hammurabi (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pxf3osuEuu>).

Several conference presentations (and likely future publications) grew out of the project. In cooperation with Matuszak, Paulus organized a well-attended panel at the American Society of Overseas Research annual meeting. Included among the fifteen presentations were Gordon’s talk on “Literary Intertextuality in the Context of the Old Babylonian Scribal School” and Paulus’s on “Back to School in Babylonia—School at the End of an Era.” Díaz Herrera presented her new finds on the composition of the lexical list Ea at the American Oriental Society’s annual meeting and the Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale in Helsinki in a paper titled “*a-ku-me-pap*: Building on Previous Knowledge in Old Babylonian Nippur Schools.” Ouimet wrote a groundbreaking master’s thesis, “An Education in Clay: Technological Action and Embodied Knowledge in an Old Babylonian Scribal School,” which explores the making, handling, and recycling of clay tablets. And after defending his PhD in March 2023, Siegmund started a position as a postdoc at the Visual Interactions in Early Writing Systems project in Cambridge, United Kingdom.

CATALOGING THE COLLECTION

During the year and a half he has worked as tablet cataloger, Winters has cataloged approximately 1,515 tablets, of which more than 90 percent are unpublished. Some shorter administrative tablets require as little as

five to ten minutes to catalog, while others—depending on their period, genre, and state of preservation—can require several hours of work.

At least 75 percent of the tablets cataloged date to the Neo-Sumerian or Ur III period (ca. 2100–2000 BCE). Except for those that are very poorly preserved, all tablets belonging to this period have been fully transliterated and provided with a detailed summary of their contents, physical characteristics (including sealings, if present), dating, and provenience. The provenience has been determined not merely on the basis of the use of a given month name (since different centers in the Ur III state employed different local calendars) but also on a qualitative basis using prosopography and content; in some cases, this method has resulted in the revision of a previously assigned provenience. Tablets from this period come primarily from ancient Puzriš-Dagan (Drehem), Umma (Tell Jokha), and Girsu (Telloh).

A beautiful example is A2666, a sealed tablet inscribed with an extensive and diverse list of food-stuffs expended for “the festival of the protective goddess of (the king) Šu-Sîn” (fig. 8). Some of the items listed are otherwise only rarely attested. The first five lines contain a “recipe” of ingredients to be used for “cakes”: fine flour, dates, other dried fruits, and oil. Other items listed include various kinds of flour, breads, beer, chickpeas and small peas or beans, spices, groats, apples, and figs on strings. The tablet was sealed by the governor of Umma.

About 10 percent of cataloged tablets date to the Old Babylonian period (2000–1550 BCE). Most of them have been likewise fully transliterated and summarized, sometimes including a full or partial translation. Provenience is often difficult to determine for tablets of this period; represented sites include Sippar, Kish, Larsa, and Uruk.

About 5 percent date to the Neo- or Late Babylonian period (ca. 1000–0 BCE), with roughly half of them consisting of legal tablets and the other half belonging to various nonadministrative and learned genres, including omens, astronomical texts, and other types. For the latter category, it is usually difficult to determine provenience and exact dating.

Less than 1 percent of the cataloged items consist of Middle or Neo-Assyrian tablets (1500–609 BCE); the earlier, Middle Assyrian period is represented mostly by a handful of small administrative tablets, while the Neo-Assyrian period is represented by substantial fragments from various genres, including some surprising finds. For example, one fragment of a multicolumned tablet of unknown original dimensions (A3512) is inscribed in Neo-Assyrian script with an incantation against witchcraft, similar to the antiwitchcraft incantation



Figure 8. Fat-cross with all sides of tablet A2666. Photo by Danielle Levy.

series *Maqlû* but not duplicating any known portion of this canonical composition. The preserved text mentions warlocks and witches, sorcerers and sorceresses, a smith, a carpenter (perhaps referring to a producer of figurines used in witchcraft), and a necromancer. Just before it breaks off, the text beseeches the sun god Šamaš against “my sorcerer” and “my conjurer.”

The meticulous cataloging of the collection allows researchers and the wider public to find objects of interest for their research, teaching, and exploration. Tablets cataloged by Winters are frequently featured on ISAC’s social media as well.

Additionally, Díaz Herrera worked with the support of Foy Scalf, head of ISAC’s Research Archives, on cross-referencing all tablets in the collection with the most common databases in the field: the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative and the Database of Neo-Sumerian Texts, both of which are already integrating our materials. An additional integration with the newer electronic Babylonian Library is in progress.

NIPPUR TABLET PROJECT

The goal of the Nippur Tablet Project is to catalog, digitize, and, wherever necessary, publish the cuneiform tablets excavated in their archaeological context by ISAC from 1948 onward. Nippur was the cultural and religious center of ancient Babylonia for thousands of years and has a rich textual culture spanning most periods of Mesopotamian history. Currently, Díaz Herrera is the assistant curator coordinating the project with the support of Levy for photography. In 2024, Gordon joined for editing, cataloging, and additional research.

During the 2022–24 period, Díaz Herrera undertook cataloging the first three seasons of excavations (1948–52). Work on the first season, which yielded only a few tablets, is complete; notable finds include a building inscription of the Old Babylonian king Lipit-Eštar commemorating the building of a temple in Isin (A31354) and a fragment with a royal inscription of the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (A31355; fig. 9).

Cataloging the third season, where most tablets come from Nippur’s Scribal Quarter, was of major importance for the exhibition; 156 tablets were cataloged, and more than 100 of them were published with photos in the exhibition catalog. It is little known to the scholarly community that scribal education in this neighborhood was not limited to the Old Babylonian period. Currently, the team is researching the tablets from the preceding Ur III period, as well as those of the later Middle Babylonian period, with the aim of publishing them in their archaeological context. Work on the tablets from the second season is still in process, with 64 of the 143 tablets completed.



Figure 9. Fat-cross with all sides of the cylinder A31355. Photo by Danielle Levy.

While tablets from the Nippur excavations are divided among the Iraq Museum, Penn Museum, and ISAC, plaster casts of all excavated tablets are part of the ISAC collection. Cataloging and digitizing these casts is a further priority. While the material in the Penn Museum is well documented, the Tablet Collection is currently cooperating with the Cuneiform Artefacts of Iraq in Context project on digitizing the tablets in the Iraq Museum.

SUPPORT FOR RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

Supporting research and educational efforts is a major priority of the Tablet Collection. Our assistant curators, Ouimet (since 2023) and Siegmund (until 2023), supported a total of forty-five researchers and their projects, as well as eight external visitors to the collections.

Faculty at ISAC used cuneiform tablets for their classes. Teachers and professors supported included Gordon, Rebecca Hasselbach-Andee, Matuszak, Ouimet, Paulus, Hervé Reculeau, Scalf, Mehrnoush Soroush, Vorderstrasse, and Winters. The ability to teach with cuneiform objects is widely acknowledged as one of the major draws of the program in Chicago, allowing students to experience and explore knowledge on real objects. The collection also welcomed students directly for practicing reading and line drawings.

We welcomed visitors studying various topics, from the size of cuneiform script (Chuck Bigelow, independent researcher) to tablets from ISAC's excavations in the Diyala (Clemens Reichel, Toronto), Nuzi (Faith Myrick, Johns Hopkins), and Khorsabad (Grant Frame, University of Pennsylvania) to Ur III sealings (Rudi Mayr, independent researcher), ritual tablets (Frank Simons, Trinity College Dublin), and lexical lists (Delnero, Johns Hopkins).

In addition, we provided high-resolution photographs (taken by Levy) and reflectance transformation images (by Ouimet) to scholars worldwide in support of their research. These scholars included Marine Béranger (Freie Universität Berlin), Carlos Gonçalves (Universidade de São Paulo), Christian Hess (Centre nationale de la recherche scientifique, France), Palmiro Notizia (University of Bologna), Walther Sallaberg (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich), Bernhard Schneider (University of Wrocław), and Niek Veldhuis (University of California, Berkeley).

As is undoubtedly apparent from this report, it has been an incredibly busy time for the Tablet Collection and the Nippur Tablet Project. Everything we have achieved was possible only through the support of our donors and the immense dedication and excellent work of our team members.