

Christopher Woods

Christopher Woods devoted much of this past year to several projects that revolve around Sumerian writing and writing systems more generally. The centerpiece of these efforts has been launching our Early Writing in Mesopotamia Project, which endeavors to provide a comprehensive description of how the technology of cuneiform writing represented language. The project will investigate early cuneiform writing from the perspective of both language — how sound and meaning are systematically expressed diachronically and synchronically — and semiotics — the graphic organization and history of the symbols that comprise the system. The scope of the project is the cuneiform written record from the invention of writing in the late fourth millennium BC (ca. 3300 BC) through the Old Babylonian period

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(ca. 1600 BC). While Sumerian writing is at the center of the project — Sumerian being in all likelihood the language for which writing was invented in Mesopotamia — the adaptation of the script to express Semitic (Akkadian and Eblaite), and the long-term interplay between these writing systems are major concerns. We were fortunate to win for our upstart project a Humanities- and Social Sciences-wide competition for a two-year Mellon post-doctoral fellow. Dr. Massimo Maiocchi, an Assyriologist with a specialty in Eblaite and Old Akkadian, will join the Oriental Institute in September to begin his two-year tenure as the project's full-time post-doctoral fellow. Dr. Maiocchi will additionally co-teach with Chris a course on writing systems and decipherments as part of the Mellon grant.

Chris has also been working this year on the Oriental Institute's project to scan our eighteen token balls from Choga Mish, Iran, using state-of-the-art computed tomography (CT) technology (for details, see *News & Notes* 215, pp. 3–8, 2012). The project represents a collaboration between the Oriental Institute and North Star Imaging of Rogers, Minnesota, and Kinetic Vision of Cincinnati, Ohio. The token balls are sealed clay envelopes that contain clay counters, or “tokens” of various kinds; they constituted administrative devices that were used in proto-literate societies in the ancient Near East to control the flow of various commodities. The envelopes have played a central role in the debate concerning the origins of writing. However, the fact that envelopes are sealed, and so conceal their contents from inspection, has been a considerable obstacle in understanding these proto-literate accounting devices. Our scanning project addresses this issue by allowing us to digitally open the envelope and inspect the tokens within.

Chris gave a talk in August 2011 in connection with the token balls project at the Three Rivers Technical Conference in Elk River, Minnesota. He also presented on “Sumerian Writing in Typological Perspective,” an invited lecture at University of Copenhagen's Center for Canon and Identity in June 2011; on “Understanding Gilgamesh” at the Skokie Public Library in February 2012; and on “The Writings of Some Sumerian Toponymns: Their Emblematic and Semantic Origins” at the IXth Symposium of the “Idea of Writing” in Paris in June 2012. Chris's articles “Sons of the Sun: The Mythological Foundations of the First Dynasty of Uruk” (*Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions* 12/1 [2012]: 78–96) and “The Conjugation Prefixes, the Dative Case, and the Empathy Hierarchy in Sumerian,” in *Grammatical Case in the Languages of the Middle East and Europe* (Acts of the International Colloquium Variations, concurrence et évolution des cas dans divers domaines linguistiques, Paris, 2–4 April 2007), edited by Michèle Fruyt, Michel Mazoyer, and Dennis Pardee, pp. 11–19 (*Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization* 64; Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 2011) as well as several minor contributions, were published this year. Chris also completed several other articles this year including “Mutilation of Text and Image in Sumerian Sources,” and “Linguistics in the Ancient Near East.”
