Back to School in Babylonia



INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF ANCIENT CULTURES
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
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Back to School in Babylonia

Edited by
Susanne Paulus

with
Marta Díaz Herrera, Jane Gordon, Madeline Ouimet,
Colton G. Siegmund, and Ryan D. Winters

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Back: Reverse of the same tablet, with an excerpt from the *List of Professions and Human Beings* (Lu).
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Foreword

Theo van den Hout
Interim Director, Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures—West Asia & North Africa

"Reading is dreaming with eyes wide open." I saw this statement recently on a container near a public school in the Prospect Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn in New York City. The ability to read, also known as *passive literacy*, opens a whole world of information and the capacity to act on that information. Our world is full of written messages, from illuminated exit signs and the floor numbers on elevator buttons to advertisements and street names. Everywhere we go, letters, numbers, and pictograms surround us. Most of the time we don't even realize we're reading. We register the signs in our subconscious and are hardly aware how much we need them to navigate the world we live in. It is only when we travel in a foreign country and encounter a language we don't speak that the point is brought home how much we rely on our ability to read *and* understand. Add a different script, and we feel reduced to a state of total illiteracy—we feel truly lost.

And those are just the signs on buildings and in the street. What about newspapers, books, installation manuals, and election ballots? Without reading, there is no political process, there are no rights; a person's life is reduced to something akin to pieces of paper scattered in the wind, blown to wherever they're carried.

The ability to write, or *active literacy*, goes a step further. Young children in America often learn to write their names before they enter first grade and master all the letters of the alphabet, as well as numerals. Even though they need to learn only a few dozen distinct signs, writing requires a lot of time and effort before it becomes automatic. And what about children in China and Japan, who must memorize hundreds if not thousands of characters?

We take reading and writing mostly for granted, not realizing that in the United States alone there are literally millions of people who are either illiterate or can do little more than write their own name. At this very moment, a debate is taking place in American education about literacy curricula. According to a May 10, 2023, *New York Times* article, "about half of [New York] city children in grades three through eight are not proficient in reading. Black, Latino, and low-income children fare even worse." Old strategies for teaching students to read—for example, showing them a word with a picture and having them guess what the word spells—have not worked well. So to its reading programs New York City is now adding phonics, whereby students learn to sound out words letter by letter.

These problems are not new. The invention of writing may go back to the fourth millennium BCE, but apparently we still haven't found an easy way to master the technique. Learning to read and write requires not only fine motor skills and intellectual effort but also the stamina to complete a training program that ordinarily takes several years. Every generation of children and adults, no matter where they are in the world, will struggle and sometimes despair in this pursuit. Do the bite marks on one ancient tablet (**cat. no. 13**; fig. 1.6) reflect the frustration of a young Babylonian student, much as we might angrily crumple up a piece of paper and toss it in the garbage can or fling a notebook across the room?

I am deeply grateful to Prof. Susanne Paulus, her dedicated team of students and colleagues, and the entire staff of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures for creating the beautiful special exhibition *Back to School in Babylonia* and for showcasing the timelessness, importance, and struggles of literacy education.

The exhibition serves as a welcome confirmation and consolation that we are never alone or unique in our pursuit to learn to write and read, no matter at what age we do so. Explore the exhibition, read this catalog, and let your mind wander knowing that reading is just another kind of dreaming—one with eyes wide open.



Foreword

Eleanor Robson
Professor of Ancient Middle Eastern History, University College London

I have been living with House F in my head for more than a quarter of a century now, so *Back to School in Babylonia* provokes many thoughts and memories. I hope that by sharing some of them here I can add another layer of documentation to this rich and wide-ranging catalogue, and further enhance your enjoyment and understanding of this unique and fascinating exhibition.

For most of the twentieth century, studies of Babylonian scribal education were, broadly speaking, of two types. Early works relied heavily on the picture presented by a group of eight literary dialogues purporting to describe Old Babylonian school life. However, these dialogues present an idealised image and cannot be relied on for information as to what scribal training was *really* like. Second, there were major studies of the main "school subjects," from lexical lists and Sumerian grammar, proverbs, and other literature to legal contracts, model letters, and mathematics. Then Niek Veldhuis's pioneering doctoral thesis on elementary education in Nippur (1997) opened the way to understanding them as the products of a historically contextualised pedagogical process.

Inspired and encouraged by him and Steve Tinney—then investigating the elementary Sumerian literary works he dubbed the "*Tetrad*" and "*Decad*" (1999)—my initial aim in studying House F was to understand better the intellectual environment in which ancient mathematics was produced. Through a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellowship held at Wolfson College, Oxford, in 1997–2000, I spent the summers of 1998 and 1999 in Chicago and Philadelphia becoming intimately acquainted with previously unloved and overlooked casts and fragments. I also scoured the day books and find catalogues of the Joint Expedition to Nippur of the University Museum of Philadelphia (now Penn Museum) and the Oriental Institute (now Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures) of the University of Chicago.

However, I soon discovered a major constraint on this type of research—a constraint that left my postdoctoral work incomplete and still affects the practice of Assyriology today. Until Iraqi law changed in 1968, it was standard practice to divide archaeological finds between international excavators' home institutions and the Iraq Museum in Baghdad. In the case of House F, almost 1,000 tablets and fragments were sent to the Penn Museum and ISAC, either as gifts or as long-term study loans, and plaster casts were made of the rest, unfortunately before they were cleaned or joined. Thus the assemblage, and even parts of individual tablets, were scattered across multiple institutions and two continents, rendering holistic study of them almost impossible.

A brief visit to Baghdad in early 2001, where I also presented the conference paper that would become "The Tablet House" (2001), gave me tantalising access to key mathematical tablets in the Iraq Museum. These days, every time I see a House F tablet on museum display in Iraq, I am increasingly determined to use new technologies and the current politics of cooperation to facilitate the virtual reassembly of the House F archive, complete my long-stalled project, and help return dispersed Assyriological knowledge to Iraq.

Nevertheless, as this lovely exhibition shows, we have already learned a great deal from the archaeologically contextualised microstudy of House F and other pedagogical spaces in cuneiform culture. First, while House F is often taken, understandably, as typical of Babylonian scribal education, it was also very idiosyncratic. Even in Old Babylonian Nippur, teachers each had their own repertoire of school exercises: for learning

syllables, the House F teacher preferred a composition we call *Syllable Alphabet* B over *Syllabary* TuTaTi, which is widespread across the rest of the city. And other communities, in other times and places, had their own interpretations and instantiations of the common culture of scribal education, not least through contact with other scripts and languages.

The minutiae of the scribal writings from House F, passed over by previous generations of Assyriologists, also give us an empathetic insight into long-ago childhood and the struggles of attaining competency in an intended profession. There is something particularly moving about holding a piece of clay, shaped by tiny fingers many millennia ago, and observing the misshapen signs, erasures, and wobbly lines pressed so earnestly into its surface—visible, I hope, even through glass. Please, take a moment to really look.

But the House F tablets can tell us even more. All the many thousands of cuneiform documents from the ancient Middle East were written by professional scribes trained in schools like this one. By illuminating the methods by which those scribes were educated, this exhibition sheds light on the creative processes and sociopolitical drives behind ancient literature and mathematics—processes and drives that are ultimately behind the whole of the Babylonian historical record. House F is a gift to the world that will keep on giving for a long time yet.

Preface

Marc Maillot
Chief Curator, Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures Museum

When writing was born in the ancient Near East at the end of the fourth millennium BCE, in present-day southern Iraq, scribes used the raw clay tablet as their medium, in part because resources such as stone, metal, and wood were lacking in Mesopotamia. Initially transcribing the Sumerian language, writing was pictographic but soon became schematic because of the medium itself, as in clay it is easier to register straight lines than curves while using a reed stylus. Pressed into the fresh clay with light pressure at an angle, the square or triangular cross section of the reed stylus left signs printed in negative that had a nail or wedge shape; hence the modern term *cuneiform*, which comes from Latin *cuneus*, meaning "wedge."

Thanks to its plasticity, clay made it possible to produce inscribed objects in different shapes, such as prisms and cylinders, but the tablet was the preferred format because it could be adapted to the size of the text one wished to write. The smallest known tablet is the size of a postage stamp, while the largest exceeds 50 centimeters / 20 inches. Archaeologists working in the Near East have unearthed more than a million cuneiform texts, written mostly in Sumerian and in Akkadian, a Semitic language that adapted cuneiform writing for its own use. Other languages, such as Hittite, also used cuneiform until it finally disappeared during the first century CE.

Among this mass of documents brought to light, a few thousand school texts, discovered in southern Mesopotamia and dating mainly from the beginning of the second millennium, have allowed modern scholars to reconstruct the course curriculum followed by apprentice scribes. What does it mean to learn? How can we define knowledge? These timeless questions cover complex and changing phenomena involving many fields of the humanities. Reflecting on them is even more essential today, when the concept of learning has been called into question by the increasing presence of artificial intelligence in the twenty-first century.

The collection of artifacts presented in *Back to School in Babylonia* offers a transdisciplinary approach to enlighten and enrich reflection on what it means to learn. Here the main objective has been to bring together archaeology, philology, anthropology, history, and sociology. All the contributions in this catalog have in common the importance of the materiality of knowledge and, by extension, its conditions of access. To that end, the Tablet Collection of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures (ISAC) offers one of the most complete and comprehensive series available worldwide. More than 7,000 tablets and other inscribed objects—including 700 cones, prisms, and various fragments—encompass a wide variety of texts, from economic to literary.

A distinguishing feature of the ISAC collection is that the majority of tablets come from archaeological excavations undertaken by ISAC at sites within its geographical area of expertise, such as Iraq (Nippur, the Diyala region, Khorsabad) and Iran (Persepolis, Choga Mish), in the early twentieth century. At that time, it was common and legal practice for the host country to give a portion of the excavated finds to the institution leading or funding the archeological fieldwork. Because ISAC excavated at Nippur jointly with the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Penn Museum) in Philadelphia, this catalog includes an illustrative selection of tablets loaned by the Penn Museum, which received a share of tablets from Nippur as did ISAC and the Iraq Museum in Baghdad.

Of crucial importance to *Back to School in Babylonia*, the numerous tablets coming from House F in Nippur, identified by modern scholars as a scribal school, offer an unparalleled snapshot of learning processes, daily life, and teaching methods in ancient Mesopotamia. House F represents one of the rare and particularly fruitful occasions when the archaeological context of the tablets was perfectly recorded, allowing a detailed reconstruction of the school curriculum.

Back to School in Babylonia affords the ISAC Museum an exceptional opportunity to present to a wide audience a technological panorama of ancient school practices. For the Museum collection, it constitutes a powerful anchor in the daily life of Chicago's constituents through its comparative approach: Was the reality of a student's life in ancient Mesopotamia so different from today? There is often an opposition between story-driven exhibitions and object-focused shows. The *Back to School in Babylonia* exhibition demonstrates that we can approach the collection simultaneously on both fronts through the materiality of the tablets. Put succinctly, it is a matter of reappropriating the artifacts in the mental sphere of the spectator. The scientific production of ISAC researchers—their study of daily-life practices linked to techniques and artifacts—shows that ISAC has always taken this approach. Its scholars have long favored as a contender for their research the embodiment of texts in a set of repetitive actions and familiar objects. From the ISAC Museum's perspective, this approach allows personification through comparison, which helps the audience gain a sense of the reality of the objects exhibited through ISAC's adult and youth program.

Many scholars and ISAC Museum staff members made this special exhibition and catalog possible. Our gratitude goes first to Susanne Paulus, curator of the exhibition and of ISAC's Tablet Collection, and associate professor of Assyriology at ISAC and in the University of Chicago's Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations (NELC). Closely partnering, the Tablet Collection team and the ISAC Museum's staff helped guide the exhibition and this catalog through the various steps of their development. Two dozen authors, several of them located at the University of Chicago within ISAC and NELC, contributed to the essays and catalog descriptions in this volume. Penn Museum assisted with loans of artifacts, which have helped reinforce the comparative approach and context of the Nippur tablets. We thank Penn Museum director Christopher Woods, director of collections Laura Hortz Stanton, keeper of Near East collections Katherine Blanchard, and loans registrars Anne Brancati and Adam Hutler.

We also thank the ISAC Museum team for their constant efforts and advice, which made the exhibition possible. Particular thanks go to registrars Helen McDonald and Susan Allison for their work on loans, access to the collections, preparation of object lists, and photography; conservators Laura D'Alessandro and Alison Whyte for their meticulous treatment of the most fragile tablets; Museum archivist Anne Flannery for providing access to archives and knowledge of the collections; and preparators Robert Bain and Joshua Tulisiak, assisted by Erin Bliss and Judy Radovsky, for the mount making, design, and building of the show. We are also grateful to our colleagues in ISAC's communication and education departments—Matt Welton, Tasha Vorderstrasse, and Kate Hodge—for their help in developing creative educational activities and programs related to the exhibition.

Kiersten Neumann, ISAC curator and special exhibition coordinator, kept the event, catalog, and publicity on schedule and provided incomparable insight on design and layout. In ISAC's publications office, managing editor Andrew Baumann exercised his exceptional taste and keen eye to provide us with a state-of-the-art catalog. ISAC Museum shop manager Denise Browning, with the support of Danielle Levy, carefully prepared a selection of merchandise at an affordable price that combines our educational purposes with an inimitable style. We thank all the reviewers of the catalog for their input and constructive feedback.

We also thank ISAC interim director Theo van den Hout, former associate director of administration and finance Brendan Bulger, and interim associate director of administration and finance Matt Perley for

their continued support and responsiveness toward the special exhibition program. Their personal involvement in the development of this exhibition and catalog strengthened our belief in the project's pertinence. Additional thanks go to Bill Cosper, Brad Lenz, and Emily Smith, in ISAC's development office, for all their help in building support for the show.

Our gratitude goes to several generous donors who helped make this exhibition and catalog a reality, especially Deborah and Philip Halpern, Malda and Aldis Liventals, and Catherine A. Novotny. Finally, we thank ISAC's members, visitors, and volunteers, who contribute each and every day through financial donations and dedicated time and thereby help us organize two special exhibitions per year while managing the permanent collection, none of which could happen without their passion. We hope that both the show and this catalog pique curiosity and interest in the humanities—and, most of all, that they inspire careers among the youngest of our audience.

Acknowledgments

Susanne Paulus
Associate Professor of Assyriology, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago
Curator, Tablet Collection, Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures—West Asia & North Africa

Around 1740 BCE in Babylonia, students wrote hundreds of tablets as part of their education; in 2023–24 CE, you can see their exercises in a special exhibition at the University of Chicago's Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures—West Asia & North Africa (ISAC). In the exhibition and this accompanying catalog, we have reconstructed and written about the experience of living and learning in a Babylonian school. The Joint Expedition to Nippur of the University Museum of Philadelphia (now Penn Museum) and the Oriental Institute (now ISAC) excavated these artifacts in the early 1950s together with a team of Iraqi field archaeologists. We are foremost grateful to the Iraqi people who shared their cultural heritage with us, and we are indebted to the work of the Joint Expedition and its members. The team of the ISAC Tablet Collection realized this exhibition in close collaboration with the staff of the ISAC Museum, publications office, and departments of development and communications. The exhibition includes objects from the ISAC Tablet Collection, ISAC Museum, and ISAC Museum Archives, as well as loans from the Penn Museum (Philadelphia); we are grateful to these institutions for their continuing support. In addition to the displays in the ISAC Museum special exhibition space and this catalog, we wrote a children's companion and activity book with the adventures of Inanaka and her dog Tuni, created programming for adults and children, and designed merchandise, including the first-ever ISAC plushie, Tuppi.

All this would not have been possible without the contributions of many people, and it is my great pleasure to thank all of them here.

The generous support of our donors Al and Malda Liventals, Catherine Novotny, and Deborah and Philip Halpern made *Back to School in Babylonia* possible. The ISAC Tablet Collection received additional generous support over the past few years from Abhay Parekh, Terry Friedman, and Annette Youngberg. The University of Chicago's College Center for Research and Fellowships and the UChicagoGRAD Graduate Global Impact Internship Program provided funding for and supported the participation of some of our undergraduate and graduate team members.

At ISAC, I would like to thank interim director Theo van den Hout for his support of the exhibition, as well as for sharing his knowledge on literacy; executive assistant Mariana Perlinac; and former associate director for finance and administration Brendan Bulger, assistant director for finance and administration Matt Perley, and business administrator Marianna Capeles. Additionally, our former and current development teams were crucial in raising support and awareness—I am indebted to Wally Verdooren, Polina Kasian, Bill Cosper, Bradley Lenz, and Emily Smith.

The exhibition project was realized under changing leadership at the ISAC Museum. I am grateful to former chief curator Jean Evans for her enthusiasm for the project in its initial stages, to Kiersten Neumann for her vital support as interim chief curator, and to Marc Maillot, ISAC's current associate director and chief curator, for bringing this project to a conclusion while Kiersten continued to support it enthusiastically in many aspects as curator and special exhibition coordinator. I am most grateful to our outstanding Museum team and all the work they put into making this exhibition possible. Anne Flannery, head archivist, assisted by

Apollo El-khatib and Ling Chan, spent considerable time and effort locating, digitizing, and making archival material available. Helen McDonald, registrar, patiently handled and tracked our many movement requests, and associate registrar Susan Allison supported our team with object photography. Laura D'Alessandro, head of the conservation laboratory, made sure no objects were harmed during the process, and conservator Alison Whyte did a fantastic job restoring, joining, and cleaning some of the tablets. I am much obliged to the creativity of Joshua Tulisiak, manager of exhibition design and production, for all he did to realize this show beautifully and appealingly, while preparator Robert Bain built excellent display cases and even a fancy outreach cart. The mounts were expertly crafted by Erin Bliss and Judy Radovsky, together with Josh and Rob. Without the continuous support of the Museum, this exhibition would not have been possible.

At the Penn Museum, I am foremost grateful to Williams Director Christopher Woods and deputy director and chief curator Stephen Tinney, who made the loan of highlights from their collections possible. Thanks are also due to Anne Brancati, Katherine Blanchard, Laura Hortz Stanton, Adam Hutler, Philip Jones, Allison McLaughlin, Alessandro Pezzati, and Kate Pourshariati for their contributions to the project.

Beyond the museum displays, Matt Welton, ISAC's associate director of communications, programming, and marketing, created and managed programming and outreach. I am incredibly grateful to Tasha Vorderstrasse, ISAC's university and continuing education program coordinator, for her enthusiasm for tablets and the exhibition, her willingness to share knowledge, and her day-to-day management of our social media outreach, as well as for creating opportunities to participate in adult programming and teacher workshops. Kate Hodge, ISAC's youth and family program coordinator, developed engaging programming for children and students, while Catie Witt did an excellent job as ISAC's interim volunteers manager. Denise Browning, manager of the Suq gift shop, was open to trying new merchandise and patiently worked through many revisions of plushies, socks, and more.

A project like this would not be possible without significant research. Foy Scalf, head of the ISAC Research Archives, provided any literature we could think of, shared useful knowledge about curating a special exhibition, and helped with ISAC's integrated database. Archaeologists McGuire Gibson, Augusta McMahon, and Karen Wilson supported us with their knowledge about the Nippur excavations, while Abbas Alizadeh and Andrew Wright provided photos from the site.

Our work could not have been accomplished without the past seventy years of research on House F. Beyond the publications listed in the Bibliography, we are especially grateful to the comprehensive databases we had at our disposal: Archibab (https://www.archibab.fr/), directed by Dominique Charpin; the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI, https://cdli.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/), with special thanks to Émilie Pagé-Perron, who quickly provided photos of the tablets from the Penn Museum; the Digital Corpus of Cuneiform Lexical Texts (DCCLT, http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/dcclt/), directed by Niek Veldhuis; the Datenbank sumerischer Streitliteratur (DSSt, http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/dsst/), directed by Catherine Mittermayer; Old Babylonian Model Contracts (OBMC, http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/obmc/), directed by Gabriella Spada; and last but certainly not least the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (ETCSL, https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/), edited by Jeremy Black, John Baines, Graham Cunningham, Jacob L. Dahl, Jarle Ebeling, Esther Flückiger-Hawker, Eleanor Robson, Jon Taylor, Marc Van de Mieroop, and Gábor Zólyomi.

I am grateful to all the authors of this catalog for their beautiful contributions to bringing House F to life, sharing their research and providing background information in an accessible way. Special thanks to Paul Delnero and Eleanor Robson for providing additional helpful information. Klaus Wagensonner was always available for questions and shared his knowledge about digitization and photography with our team. Hervé

Reculeau and Jana Matuszak are the best colleagues one could imagine, and their support of the project was invaluable. Both were always willing to answer the most obscure questions about anything Sumerian or Old Babylonian and to provide feedback about merchandise, and both generously ignored the steady noise of our growing Tablet Collection team. In addition, Jana reviewed chapters 21–25 and the gallery text and provided much-appreciated feedback on both.

This catalog would not look and read the same way without the meticulous dedication of Andrew Baumann, managing editor of the ISAC publications office. Sorry, Drew, for always running behind schedule and causing you sleepless nights, and a heartfelt thank-you for all you have done for the catalog! Drew was assisted by Connie Gundry Tappy (copyediting), James M. Slate (interior design), and Kristin Goble (typesetting). Kiersten Neumann also read and provided feedback on chapters 21–25. We are grateful to the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford), the Louvre Museum (Paris), and the Yale Babylonian Collection (New Haven) for permission to include images of objects in their collections. The map in this book was created using ArcGIS® software by Esri. ArcGIS® and ArcGIS® Pro are the intellectual property of Esri and are used herein under license. Copyright © Esri. All rights reserved. For more information about Esri® software, please visit www.esri.com.

The entire project could never have happened without the awesome team of the Tablet Collection. You are the best team I could ask for. It is impossible to list all that you have done, so please excuse me if I highlight only a few of your many achievements here. C Mikhail (undergraduate researcher 2020–22) and Danielle Levy (undergraduate researcher) produced most of the amazing photographs in this catalog and brought imaging of our collections to new levels. In addition, Dani was the creative force behind our merchandise. Marta Díaz Herrera (graduate researcher, now assistant curator for the Nippur Tablet Project) cataloged all Nippur tablets of the second and third excavation seasons in our collections and thereby established the foundation for the project before working on the annotations for both the catalog and the displays. Jane Gordon (graduate researcher) made vital contributions by editing the catalog in general and my essays in particular and took the lead on our children's book project. Madeline Ouimet (graduate researcher, now assistant curator) researched all archaeological aspects of the project and the archival documentation of the excavation and created maps, plans, and drawings for the catalog and exhibition. Her beautiful watercolors illustrate the children's book. Colton Siegmund contributed as assistant curator until May 2023 by adding archival documents to the integrated database, supporting research and object selection, and moving many hundreds of tablets. Ryan Winters, postdoc at the Tablet Collection, took breaks from cataloging our tablets to support the project wherever possible. During the summer of 2023, the team was joined by undergraduate researchers Pallas Eible Hargro and Sarah Ware and graduate researcher Carter Rote. They supported our work in many ways, took charge of our social media, made line drawings of cuneiform, and created materials for adult and children's education. Sarah took over the professional typesetting and layout of the children's book. To my team: I applaud your creativity, dedication, and professionalism! This exhibition is dedicated to you. You rock!

Finally, a big thank-you and love-you to Knut, who shared all the highs and lows of this marathon. Beyond his continuing moral support, he also solved technical issues, restored lost files (see below), and dedicated his time and energy to producing 3D-printed artifacts. Our felines Shadow and Smoke pawsitively supported the creation and realization of *Back to School in Babylonia* and deleted everything only once.

To our readers: we hope you enjoy this catalog. We did our best to make research about the Babylonian school as accessible as possible. We reduced the many diacritics in the Sumerian and Akkadian transliterations

to a minimum: š is pronounced sh as in **sh**ine; ĝ is pronounced ng as in ri**ng**ing; and ā, ē, ī, and ū mark long vowels. We normalized Sumerian and Akkadian spellings whenever possible, showing a word's pronunciation rather than the cuneiform signs used to write it. In the annotations on the photos, we show transcriptions corresponding directly to the different cuneiform signs and include numbers to distinguish between signs that sounded the same. All composition titles in italics are listed at the end of the book, along with references to complete and easily accessible English translations.

List of Contributors

Dominique Charpin (PhD Université de Paris 1–Sorbonne, France) is a professor at the Collège de France. His research on Mesopotamian civilization is based in particular on the royal archives of Mari, which he is coediting, and on his participation as an epigraphist in excavations at Ur and Larsa (Iraq). He directs the "Archibab" project devoted to Old Babylonian archival texts.

Jay Crisostomo (PhD University of California, Berkeley) is the George G. Cameron Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Civilization and Languages and an associate professor of Assyriology at the University of Michigan. His research and writing focus on language use, scribal cultures, education, and intellectual history in the ancient Middle East.

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PART I
Essays


3N-T129

1

Back to School in Babylonia: The Aims of Babylonian Education

Susanne Paulus

Schooling and education are widely shared yet varying experiences. Approaching these topics from our own perspectives and assumptions is logical but fraught with complexity, especially when dealing with the experiences of students who lived and learned thousands of years ago in ancient Iraq. I begin this introduction by approaching the scribal schools of the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000–1595 BCE) through my own experience in three types of encounters: as a student, as a curator, and as a teacher.

First, as a student, I discovered the Edubba'a—translated literally from the Sumerian as the "house where tablets are distributed" or the "tablet house" in Akkadian—through groundbreaking modern scholarship. I read Niek Veldhuis's "Elementary Education in Nippur" (1997) and was fascinated by how he used terse (and frankly not very appealing) clay tablets, written in cuneiform script and recovered from cities such as Nippur in Iraq, to reconstruct one of the oldest-known curricula in the world. Complementary essays by Andrew George (2005) and Konrad Volk (2011) offered insights into the literary depictions of Babylonian schooling—the so-called "Edubba'a literature," self-reflective texts written about and taught in the Edubba'a—that continue to resist complete scholarly interpretation. The struggles of Babylonian students in learning to read and write Sumerian and the cuneiform script resonated with me, a student of cuneiform studies trying to learn the same things 3,700 years later.

My second encounter came through material culture as curator of the Tablet Collection of the University of Chicago's Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures (ISAC). I still marvel at the tablets written by Babylonian students in Nippur, later excavated by the Joint Expedition of the University Museum of Philadelphia (now Penn Museum) and the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago (now ISAC) in 1951–52 and divided between the two museums' collections and the Iraq Museum in Baghdad in the host country. While school tablets have been found at a wide variety of ancient sites in the Middle East, the tablets excavated by the Joint Expedition are special because they were discovered in the context of House F, widely believed to have been a scribal school. House F has

Lenticular tablet squeezed by a frustrated student who consequently mixed up their homework. ISACM A30154. Photo by DL. This image was created without touching the object.

allowed us not only to trace the marks of frustrated students erasing their work on wet clay but also to explore the benches where ancient students sat and learned (or played board games).

Third, as a teacher, I had the pleasure of reading and discussing the texts of the ancient curriculum with a group of motivated and talented students. Over the course of a year, we followed the path of Babylonian pupils progressing from the most straightforward writing exercises to complex literary masterworks. The ancient students became our teachers—as they have done for many scholars of cuneiform studies since the humble beginnings of the field in the nineteenth century CE. The ancient students' encounters with cuneiform signs, vocabulary, and topics such as literature, law, mathematics, history, religion, rhetoric, and ethics—if we dare to use contemporary terminology—became our window into the Sumerian language and Babylonian civilization.

All three encounters influenced the creation of *Back to School in Babylonia*. The idea was to allow the public to explore the material and intellectual heritage of Iraq through the lens of the remains of a humble school and its many written sources. The project was not only about ancient education but also an educational experience (and experiment) in itself. Students Marta Díaz Herrera, Jane Gordon, Danielle Levy, C Mikhail, Madeline Ouimet, and Colton Siegmund and postdoc Ryan Winters joined me (fig. 1.1) in working alongside the professionals of the ISAC Museum and renowned specialists in the field as researchers, authors, and curators of the exhibition and catalog. Discussions in class and beyond also shaped the scholarly aim of the project, which was to reassess, after seventy years of studying House F, what the aims of Babylonian education were. The remainder of this introduction further explores these aims, while also contextualizing the essays contained in this volume. It roughly follows the outline of the exhibition, from the discovery of a school in Nippur and the reconstruction of school life in House F to the reconstruction of the curriculum and topics of education.

But before exploring the aims of Babylonian education, we start with the discovery of the Babylonian school—both intellectually and archaeologically—and then examine how the scholarly focus shifted over time from an interest in the content of the school's textual sources to a focus on the curriculum and pedagogy itself.

Discovering a School in Nippur

The discovery of Babylonian education did not start with House F. The remnants of Babylonian schools—the thousands of exercises written by Babylonian students—were part of the scholarly discussion long before they were recognized as such. The University of Pennsylvania excavated in Nippur from 1888 onward, discovering—and removing from their archaeological contexts—thousands of tablets similar to those found later in House F. Indeed, the area in which House F was situated yielded so many tablets that the excavators labeled it "Tablet Hill."

Scholars and excavators believed the tablets from Tablet Hill provided important historical and religious information about the Sumerians who lived in Babylonia in the third millennium BCE. Although the tablets themselves dated to the second millennium BCE—sometime between 2002 and 1720 BCE, when Nippur was partially abandoned (see chapter 2)—they were written in Sumerian. Sumerian had disappeared as a spoken language sometime toward the end of the third millennium BCE, when it was replaced by Akkadian (or Babylonian), a Semitic language related to modern Arabic and Hebrew. Yet Sumerian survived as a prestigious religious and scholarly language, much as Latin did in medieval Europe, and many Sumerian religious and literary texts are known only from Old Babylonian copies, so it is unsurprising that scholars used them as a window into the "Sumerian civilization." They also believed the tablets from Nippur originated from "temple libraries." From the third millennium BCE onward Nippur was the religious center of Babylonia, the seat of the head of the pantheon, Enlil (see chapters



Figure 1.1. The ISAC Tablet Collection team. *Left to right:* Madeline Ouimet, Jane Gordon, Colton Siegmund, Ryan Winters, Danielle Levy, Marta Díaz Herrera, Susanne Paulus. Not pictured: C Mikhail.

2, 3, and 18). Because the tablets were found in direct proximity to Enlil's main temple, the Ekur, and its massive temple tower (ziggurat), they were published as *Historical and Religious Texts from the Temple Library of Nippur* (Langdon 1914). Only the related lexical lists—long and systematic lists of cuneiform signs and Sumerian words—were connected with schooling, as the publication title *Sumerian Lexical Texts from the Temple School of Nippur* (Chiera 1929) betrays.

The Sumerian tablets from Nippur created great excitement in the first half of the twentieth century CE because they were thought to be the oldest religious texts treating topics known later from the Bible, and it was in this spirit that the Joint Expedition returned in 1952 to excavate Tablet Hill (fig. 1.2). In 1910, Hermann Hilprecht had published *The Earliest Version of the Babylonian Deluge Story and the Temple Library of Nippur*, a book on a Sumerian story reminiscent of the biblical story of Noah. This discovery still resonated with field director Donald McCown more than forty years later when he described his hopes of finding new material on Tablet Hill, in the areas now labeled TA and TB:

> This should be our "gold mine" for the literary tablets of the Sumerians, which are almost unique at Nippur and which give so much information about the spiritual life of Sumer. If we are lucky, we may



Figure 1.2. The Joint Expedition excavating Level VIII in Area TA (before reaching the Old Babylonian levels), viewed from the north. ISACM P. 47204 (3N/158).

> find more original editions of the Epic of Creation, new historical records, or other Sumerian epics and legends which are known only by title at present. From the purely archeological side, we will learn the material culture of this period at Nippur, so far only poorly represented in our previous excavations. (McCown 1951, 21)

The sensational discovery of more than 1,400 cuneiform tablets and fragments from House F in January 1952 (re)situated the literary and lexical tablets from Nippur in the context of modest private houses in the scribal community. At first the efforts of the Joint Expedition yielded only modest numbers of tablets. But the excavation revealed much of the tablets' context as the Scribal Quarter, with its domestic architecture and objects of daily life, came to light (see chapters 3 and 4). The excavators' luck changed shortly after Christmas, when suddenly one tablet after another was discovered in the rooms and walls of House F, inundating the expedition's epigrapher (fig. 1.3). As McCown wrote to Froehlich Rainey, director of the University Museum, and Carl H. Kraeling, director of the Oriental Institute, in 1952:

> It has been a tremendous find, with all this last week thirty to fifty tins full of tablets and fragments coming in each day (we use five gallon gas tins cut sideways as trays). In a week or so I will be able to give you figures on what was found, for it will take that long for Francis [Steele, epigrapher] to catch up. (. . .) We are busy as we can be processing the tablets, but hope to have all except the small pieces molded before we close. (McCown, unpublished letter)



Figure 1.3. Excavation photo of Room 205 in House F (Level X Floor 2) showing the discovery of several tablets. ISACM P. 47250 (3N/301).

During the excavations, motivated by the need for more funding, McCown showed immense enthusiasm about the discovery, writing in another letter to Kraeling that the "whole of Sumerian literature is now potentially recoverable." In the publication of the excavation, the focus shifted to the archaeological finds and context, and he entertained the hypothesis that some of the houses in the Scribal Quarter were indeed scribal schools. However, he struggled—as many scholars still do today—to reconcile archaeological reality with the image painted by Sumerologists reading the Edubba'a literature and imagining life in a Babylonian school.

Sumerologists believed that the Edubba'a reflected in the Sumerian sources was an institutional school with a sizable building and staff, similar to modern institutions. This conception contrasted with the modest and domestic character of House F. Indeed, the Babylonian Edubba'a literature, made famous through Samuel Noah Kramer's 1949 translation of *Schooldays* (Edubba'a A), mentions besides teachers and students a wide variety of obscure school staff facilitating all aspects of school life (see chapter 4 and the translation of *Schooldays* [Edubba'a A] on pages 238–39 in chapter 22). This picture diverged from the architecture of House F, which covered only 48 square meters/525 square feet divided into an entryway, a small courtyard, and four additional rooms (fig. 1.4; see also chapters 3 and 4)—space allowing for only a teacher (perhaps with their family) and a few students. In fact, Paul Delnero (2019, 186) estimates that four or five scribes/scribal students wrote the texts from House F. The small number of pupils can be explained by the fact that scribal training happened in several houses in Nippur's scribal quarters TA and TB (Michalowski 2012). Whether the Edubba'a texts describe a school of an earlier period (George 2005) or a fictional and playful take on Old Babylonian schooling attributing different roles to the occupants of House F (see chapter 4), it became commonly accepted that House F is an example of a Babylonian school.

Consequently, the lexical and literary tablets from Nippur were now studied and analyzed in this context. A first wave of scholars pioneered work on Babylonian education in the 1970s. They were followed by a second, continuing wave of scholars from the late 1990s onward who laid the foundations for our understanding of the curriculum and Babylonian education. While space limitations preclude our providing a full overview of this scholarship here, it is essential to mention a few milestones. As part of the project *Materials for the Sumerian Lexicon* (see pages 287–88 in chapter 23), Miguel Civil (1969) not only published educational material but also established a typology of the different kinds of school tablets (fig. 1.5; see also chapter 7). In the 1990s, Niek Veldhuis recognized that one of the tablet types, the so-called teacher–student exercise, contained previously studied materials on the reverse or back of the tablet, allowing him to reconstruct the curriculum

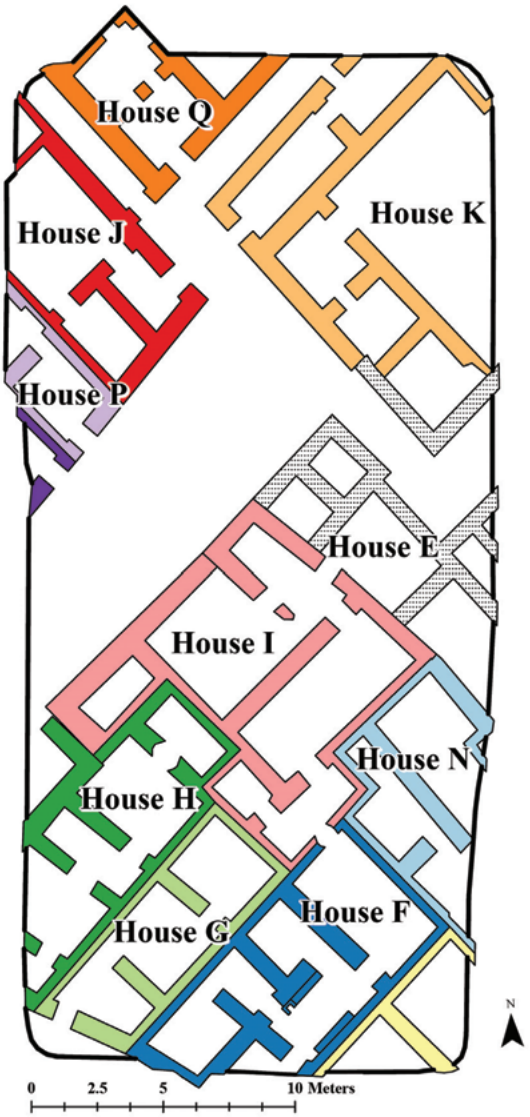


Figure 1.4. Plan of Area TA, Level X Floor 4, including House F. Created by MO based on McCown and Haines 1967, pl. 71.

published as the above-mentioned "Elementary Education in Nippur" (see also chapter 7). Another important contribution by Civil (1979) was a discussion of the lexical material in the context of House F. Building on that work, Eleanor Robson's 2001 article "The Tablet House: A Scribal School in Old Babylonian Nippur" provided a groundbreaking statistical analysis of the textual finds from House F in their archaeological context. Thanks to Herman Vanstiphout (1979), literature, equally present in House F, had become part of the conversation about Babylonian education, as he asked "How Did They Learn Sumerian?" Expanding this conversation was Stephen Tinney's research "On the Curricular Setting of Sumerian Literature" (1999), which helped identify the order in which some literary tablets were studied in the Edubba'a, including the *Decad*, a set of ten compositions covered almost at the beginning of the literary curriculum (see chapter 15). Studying hundreds of copies of those compositions and the mistakes students made when writing them, Paul Delnero (2006, 2012) discovered that the most important pedagogical goal was to learn to write compositions from memory. Finally, Konrad Volk (1996, 2011) used the Edubba'a literature to research the pedagogical methods employed by Babylonian teachers.

Aside from these significant breakthroughs, which still inform our understanding of the Babylonian school and its textual sources, many scholars—some of them contributors to this catalog—studied subgroups of educational materials, from different lexical lists and model contracts to proverbs, dialogues, letters, mathematical texts, and specific hymns and epics (see the bibliography for a comprehensive overview). Together this work allows us to understand deeply the curriculum, methods of education, and contents of texts studied in the Babylonian school.

A big question that remains concerns the purpose of scribal training. The next step in exploring the answer is to inquire about the actors involved in Babylonian education: students and teachers.

School Life—or, Who Went to School in House F?

If we want to understand education in House F, we need to learn more about the actors, or who taught whom—not an easy task, for the Babylonian students often did not sign their tablets, nor do the tablets reveal with certainty the names, titles, or social status of the people who lived and taught in House F (see chapter 5).



Figure 1.5. The five most common types of school tablets, shown to scale. *Left to right*: A multicolumn tablet, a prism, a teacher–student exercise, a single-column extract tablet, and a round tablet. Image by MDH of **cat. nos. 24**, **25**, **19**, **105**, and **17**.

In the Edubba'a literature, the actors are labeled using kin terminology and vocabulary from professional craftsmanship. The teacher is the "father" (adda) of the Edubba'a, the student a "child" (dumu), and a senior student an "older brother" (šeš gal). The same term "older brother" is also known from craft and labor organization, where it is used to mean "foreman." In that semantic field, the teacher is the "master/expert" (ummia) of the scribal art/craft (namdubsar), while students are "young or adolescent men/workers" (lu tur). The goal of the students was to become "scribes" (dubsar) or "masters" (ummia) themselves. But while the literary texts provide some answers about the actors, other questions—for example, concerning the age and gender of students—remain open.

Estimating the age when children started their education in Babylonia is still tricky. Some scholars have argued for an early starting age of five to six years (Volk 2011, 284), when children began to work in other trades alongside their parents. The singular example of a student's bite marks on a tablet (**cat. no. 13**; fig. 1.6) led to the assumption that students started as early adolescents. This analysis aligns with the term "young or adolescent men/workers" (lu tur) used in the Edubba'a literature. Neither do we know how long students stayed in school. Rarely are school documents dated so as to allow putting them into a secure chronological sequence. A rare exception of unprovenienced tablets, now in the Yale University Babylonian Collection, indicates that a student named Qišti-Ea studied literary compositions between Samsu-iluna's regnal years one and eleven, which would indicate a rather lengthy training period of more than ten years (Wagensonner 2019, 143–45).

Determining the gender of the school children presents another interesting challenge. There is solid evidence that "female scribes" (munus dubsar) existed in the Old Babylonian period and



Figure 1.6. Obverse of **cat. no. 13**, showing a student's bite marks. Photo courtesy of the Penn Museum and CDLI.

that some priestesses and princesses were literate (Lion and Robson 2005; see chapter 6). However, the Edubba'a was clearly a place where masculinity was constructed and celebrated, even if goddesses are frequently mentioned as actors in literary texts (Robson 2007). Women—with a few exceptions (see, for example, **cat. no. 104**)—were figured as housewives and mothers (chapter 20). But since the Sumerian term "child of the Edubba'a/schoolchild" is gender neutral, the essays in this catalog use gender-neutral language whenever possible.

Apart from questions of age and gender, we have significant information about the social status of the scribal students. They belonged to Nippur's elite linked with the city's many temples, especially the Ekur. Dominique Charpin shows that literacy was widespread among many social groups in Babylonia, including clergy, administrators, military officials, palace administrators, and merchants (see chapter 6). An analysis of the legal and economic documents from the neighborhood of House F indicates that the students were children of the many types of priests linked with the local temples. A special example is Elletum, the only student of House F known by name, mentioned in the colophon at the end of a lexical list from House F. After he graduated, he likely became a gudu-priest attested on several documents from the Scribal Quarter (Eleanor Robson, personal communication; see also Civil 1969, 157; Podany 2022, 341–54). Beyond real estate, the priests' most precious possessions were shares in the temple income received in exchange for performing ritual duties (prebends; see chapter 5). Priests also figure prominently in the texts studied in the Edubba'a (**cat. nos. 92** and **103**). What was the consequence of this connection for those teaching and learning in the shadow of the temple? Above we have already established that scribal training was a private affair taking place in multiple houses such as House F—to date we lack any indication that the temples were institutionally involved in scribal training.

Locally and Babylonia-wide, the scribes in Nippur formed an elite. Many of the self-reflective documents from the Edubba'a view Nippur as the center of the world (**cat. no. 68**; see chapter 18). This perspective is reflected sociohistorically in the special relationship between the kings of Isin and Larsa (and to a lesser extent those of Babylon) with Nippur as a source of divine legitimization of kingship (chapter 2). The scribes from Nippur saw themselves in direct correspondence and service to the king (Kleinerman 2011, 43–44). A satirical literary letter—the *Letter from Nabi-Enlil to Ilum-puzura*, possibly the first surviving school ranking—informs us that education in Nippur was unique and that nothing compared to it (Black et al. 2004, 281–82). While this assertion may be exaggerated—for indeed we know that scribal training was comparable in many Babylonian cities (Delnero 2019)—there is little doubt that the Edubba'a trained the local elite (Michalowski 2011) and that this local elite aspired to national leadership. With these observations in mind, we now turn to the scribal-school curriculum and its purpose.

From Signs to Literature

We have just seen that the Babylonians used two images to describe the Edubba'a: that of a father teaching his child, and that of a craftsman training his apprentice. Similarly, scholars have seen the goal of education in the Edubba'a as cultivating literate students by enabling them to read and write (Veldhuis 2011; Delnero 2019) or as constituting an apprenticeship in the scribal arts (namdubsar) (Volk 2011). Additionally, it has been argued that

the main goal was the building and confirming of a social elite. We will explore these ideas after looking at the curriculum taught at House F in Nippur.

Modern scholarship divides Babylonian education into two phases: an elementary phase, during which students studied many lexical materials, and a second phase dominated by all kinds of "literature." During the elementary phase of education (fig. 1.7), two of the first tasks a novice had to master were forming a clay tablet and using a reed



Figure 1.7. Topics taught during the first phase of scribal education. Image by MDH of (*left to right, top to bottom,* shown to scale) **cat. nos. 40**, **44**, **45**, **53**, **85**, **58**, and **89**.

stylus to impress the typical elements of cuneiform: wedges. Once over the first hurdle, the student was quickly confronted with the next challenge—learning the cuneiform writing system. The cuneiform script, developed at the end of the fourth millennium BCE, consists of syllables (for example, a, an, na, and naĝ). Students learned those elements first by writing various "syllabaries" followed by lists of personal names (see chapter 8). Already when writing the lists of personal names, students encountered additional elements of cuneiform. While names could be written purely with syllables, all cuneiform signs are also word signs (logograms), and one sign can represent a full word. So a word such as "god" can be written with three syllables—in this case, di-mi-ir (for diĝir)—or with one logogram,  . An accomplished scribe of Sumerian preferred using logograms whenever possible and used syllables only for grammatical elements or the like. Mastering the many word signs, students studied first the *Thematic List of Words* (Ura), learning how to write words for everything from trees and wooden objects to animals, plants, geographical names, and food (see chapter 7). Other word lists studied in the Edubba'a focused on human beings and their professions.

However, knowing words and syllables represented only one step toward mastering the cuneiform system. Like the strokes of Chinese characters, each cuneiform sign is constructed from a combination of wedges that can range from the simple  to the very complex . With the help of a special list organized by sign shape (an acrographic list), students mastered this aspect of writing. Finally, each cuneiform sign can be read and pronounced in multiple ways—the sign "god," for example, can be read diĝir when meaning "god" but also an when meaning "sky." Furthermore, can represent the syllable an without the meaning "sky." Students mastered this aspect via sign lists, which covered signs and all their potential readings (on all these lists, see chapter 9).

Beyond lexical lists, students covered several other genres toward the end of the elementary phase. Training in mathematics included metrological lists, covering all kinds of measurements; multiplication tables; and reciprocals followed by simple calculations (see chapter 13). At the same time, students were also introduced to proverbs, short sayings and stories (chapter 12), and model contracts—exercises for writing legal contracts (chapter 14). While diverging widely in content, both proverbs and model contracts presented students with full sentences, which are absent from lexical lists, thus highlighting the importance for students to move beyond words and discover the elements of grammar (chapter 11). These easy texts formed the transition to the next phase of education: the study of literature.

During the second phase of scribal education, students studied a wide variety of texts that scholars summarize generally under the term "literature" (fig. 1.8). Eleanor Robson (2001) has calculated that 42 percent of the tablets found in House F are lexical and about 50 percent are literary, with the remaining 8 percent being legal and administrative documents (see chapter 5).

Although scholars distinguish two phases of scribal education, they were deeply connected. Several studies (for example, Crisostomo 2015) have highlighted the interdependency of the lexical and the literary—a student writing and understanding Sumerian literature needed the knowledge gained through the likely tedious study of lexical texts. The corpus of literature studied in House F was vast and included more than 600 tablets with 80 compositions that scholars group into generic categories, such as "myths and epics; city laments and hymns to rulers; law codes and letters; hymns to deities; and school dialogues, disputations, and wisdom literature" (Robson 2001, 50). Topics covered varied widely, from still-well-known stories about the legendary Gilgameš (**cat. no. 74**) to self-praise of a very athletic king (**cat. no. 63**) and a literary competition between deified grain and a ewe (**cat. nos. 119–20**). While these compositions are well studied, it is difficult to reconstruct the sequence of their use in the students' literary education. The first compositions



Figure 1.8. Topics taught during the second phase of scribal education. Image by MDH of (*left to right, top to bottom,* shown to scale) **cat. nos. 57**, **121**, **107**, **102**, **62**, **117**, ISACM A24189, and **cat. no. 97**.

were possibly introduced during the elementary phase (Tinney 1999; see chapter 11). A prime example is **cat. no. 59**, where in very cursory script a student first wrote *Syllable Alphabet* B, one of the earliest exercises, followed by an excerpt from the simplest literary text, the *Praise Poem of Lipit-Eštar* B.

Then, after proverbs and model contracts, students studied a group of ten diverse literary texts, the so-called *Decad* (**cat. nos. 63–74**; see chapter 15). After that point the study sequence is unclear, though Robson (2001) has identified fourteen compositions most frequently taught in House F in addition to the *Decad*.

Having now gained a detailed overview of the curriculum in House F, we may return to the question of its purpose. Was the goal of the Edubba'a indeed to make students literate? Undoubtedly, graduates of the Edubba'a *were* literate (see chapter 6). After having learned by heart more than 8,000 entries in the lexical lists followed by memorization of thousands of lines of literature—not simply copying them but actually studying them to the point of being able to reproduce whole compositions from memory (Delnero 2012)—these students knew how to read, write, and compose in Sumerian. However, literacy in Sumerian was not practical, for when House F's Edubba'a was in operation, Sumerian was no longer spoken and only rarely written in documents of daily life—there, Akkadian or Babylonian dominated.

Literacy in Akkadian was not the focus but instead a by-product of the curriculum at best. Akkadian was rarely written in the Edubba'a, and, if we trust the Edubba'a literature, students were forbidden to speak in Akkadian in school. Sometimes students added Akkadian translations to Sumerian lexical lists (glossing; see chapter 10), but less than a handful of exercises from House F are written in Akkadian. Marine Béranger's 2018 study of Old Babylonian letter-writing practice showed that some exercises in the first phase of education—such as syllabaries, the lists of personal names, and the *List of Simple Signs* (Ea)—were helpful for writing Akkadian, but training for practical knowledge—for example, how to compose more complex letters—was not part of the curriculum. Based on an analysis of mistakes in those letters, she demonstrated that most people writing them were likely not trained via the curriculum of the Edubba'a. Basic literacy could be gained effectively without the extensive curriculum taught in the scribal schools of Nippur. Niek Veldhuis (2011) has therefore argued that students became "scholarly literate" in the Edubba'a, meaning they gained the literacy necessary for scribes. This view supports the idea of the curriculum as a training process for becoming a scribe.

Compared to other crafts, such as carpentry or smithing, the profession of a scribe was far from homogenous. Most scribes worked in institutions of varying sizes—temples or palaces, for example—taking records, accounting, surveying fields, and managing workers and troops. Scribes were needed for all kinds of legal affairs, from writing marriage contracts to composing court protocols. Others specialized in cultic professions—for example, as lamentation priests appeasing the gods, as musicians, or as diviners who predicted the future by studying the entrails of animals offered as sacrifices. We can assume that most official written records, such as royal inscriptions and law codes, were composed by scribes, as were the texts of the Edubba'a.

So did the Edubba'a prepare its students for all the skills and aspects of their future tasks as scribes? While the students gained knowledge and skills that were helpful for their professional careers, their training was far from practical or complete. Paul Delnero (2022) has shown that even an elementary scribal education formed a solid base for students going on to become cult professionals. On the other hand, many important religious text genres covering liturgy, magic, and divination were not taught in the Edubba'a (Michalowski 2012). While the graduates of the Edubba'a praised themselves for mastering the totality of the scribal art, including complex ledgers and accounting, the reality was different. No exercises covering accounting or field surveying are preserved from House F. A scribe going on to write royal inscriptions or law collections would find the examples covered in school rather outdated. Instead of the contemporaneous *Code of Hammu-rabi* or Hammu-rabi's Akkadian and bilingual royal inscriptions, the curriculum focused on the kings of Akkad and the Ur III and Isin-Larsa dynasties (see chapter 17). This

traditionalism has led to the idea that in troubled times the teachers tried to preserve their past. In sum, if the goal of the Edubba'a was to train scribes for all aspects of their profession, it failed.

Was completing the curriculum, then, only an impractical and excessive but necessary job requirement and introduction to an elite status in society (Veldhuis 2014, 225)? Did the teachers torment their students with thousands of lines of lexical lists and texts as a *rite de passage*, a common experience to create a knowledge bond of unity (Michalowski 2012)? To suppose so underestimates Babylonian schooling. On the contrary, I argue that the texts were carefully selected for curricular purposes. Many of them are consistent from one scribal school to another throughout Babylonia (Delnero 2019). Some, such as selected lexical lists and the *Instructions of Šurruppak*, had been used for centuries; others, especially the extensive literature, are curricular innovations of the Old Babylonian period. If we assume the teachers had agency in selecting and in some cases even composing these exercises, an analysis of the contents can help us understand the goals of the Edubba'a, which certainly cultivated literate pupils, was the source of scribal training, and helped confirm a social elite. Further, I argue that the experience of the Edubba'a was an education in and of itself.

Topics of Education

Since the time of the ancient Greek philosophers, much ink has been spilled on the definition of *education*. At its simplest, education is about transmitting knowledge, acquiring skills, and fostering character traits. Several essays in this book explore the topics of Babylonian education. If we were able to ask Babylonian students what they learned in the Edubba'a, one possible answer would have gone like this:

> I absolutely know my scribal art.
> Nothing withholds me from it.
> My master shows me one sign,
> (and) I add a second one through my wisdom.
> From my appointed time I was sitting,
> now I am equally adept in Sumerian, scribal art, accounting, and balancing books.
> I can converse in Sumerian!
>
> *Scribal Activities* (Edubba'a D), 32–38

This passage combines what we would consider practical knowledge or skills (know-how for calculating, accounting, and balancing books) with scribal art, or scholarly knowledge. The student "speaking" in this text is now at the same level as the master and through their wisdom can enlarge the master's knowledge one-to-one. While modesty is certainly not a character trait on display here, in another Edubba'a story a graduate highlights that aspect of education and praises the teacher:

> He guided my hand on the clay and kept me on the right path,
> he made me eloquent with words and gave me advice.
> He focused my eyes on the rules that guide a man with a task:
> zeal is proper for a task, time-wasting is taboo;
> anyone who wastes time on his task is neglecting his task.
> He did not vaunt his knowledge: his words were modest.
>
> *Advice of a Supervisor to a Younger Scribe* (Edubba'a C), lines 11–16 (translation after ETCSL 5.01.03)

These lines do not just praise a teacher; as the text itself was used to educate students, these values were also transmitted from the teacher to the student. In sum, these short extracts confirm the idea that the Edubba'a provided education in character, skills, and knowledge.

Forming "ideal scribes" was the goal of the Edubba'a's character-building aspect (Volk 2000): ideal scribes were knowledgeable, motivated, and determined rather than lazy. Being good colleagues, they were reliable, honorable, and able to solve conflicts rather than given to starting quarrels. They had good manners, especially at the table. Their

standing in society and relationship with the gods were impeccable. Good scribes came from respectable families, including the elite families of Nippur, and were settled and independent, with respectable wealth and no debts (Volk 2000). At the side of a successful scribe we find the "ideal woman"—a good housewife and mother (see chapter 20). Teachers conveyed these ideals through positive examples of respectable scribes and scholars, through direct advice such as that contained in the *Instructions of Šuruppak*, and most often through ridiculing the opposite characteristics. The goal was to form children into "humans" (lulu) while teaching them the skills of the scribal art.

Concerning the skills learned by those scribes, we have already discussed advanced scholarly literacy in detail. Beyond facility in that area, students gained a set of skills that formed a solid base for their future careers but did not replace specialized training, which could be pursued later (or even in parallel). That skill set comprised training in mathematics, law and legal reasoning, and rhetoric. Training in mathematics included the basics of multiplication and reciprocals, which were used for division. Addition and subtraction were probably assumed and not further treated. The teachers in House F taught only easy calculations, while more complex problems were solved elsewhere (see chapter 13). Students also learned to handle the complex system of measurements and to write practical legal documents, such as loans and other contracts. Through studying law collections and model court cases, they also practiced legal reasoning (chapter 14). While we have little insight into the oral components of students' scribal education, dialogues and disputes show that making an argument and defending it formed part of their instruction (chapters 19 and 20). Beyond disputes between students, such skills could be applied to accusation or defense in court or to formulate an appeal to the king. Together, those skills likely allowed graduates to receive more specialized training based on the needs required by their profession: a field surveyor would learn more about surface calculation, while a lamentation priest would acquire training in the intricacies of religious texts.

In addition, scribal students learned a good deal of knowledge specific to their intellectual life, beliefs, and history. We discover this aspect of their education by focusing on the knowledge transmitted in the Edubba'a. Nippur and its deities figured prominently in the school curriculum and appeared in hymns, myths, letters, and short stories. Beyond these subjects, students learned the basics of the cult and studied examples of typical religious genres, such as hymns and laments (see chapter 18). Among the other deities, Inana—goddess of love and war—was an especially recurring figure. Historical topics were also taught selectively, focusing on the famous Ur III king Šulgi and certain kings of Isin and Larsa, such as Lipit-Eštar and Sin-iddinam, while omitting many others. Major historical events, such as the fall of Akkad and the destruction of Sumer and Ur (and of course Nippur) were memorized. Students approached history through a variety of text genres, from hymns and laments and lists of kings to historical correspondence and inscriptions (chapter 17). Stories of the legendary kings whose names still resonate in modern times were also part of the curriculum—tales about Gilgameš, Enmerkar, and Lugalbanda. Strikingly, kings, be they historical or legendary, were presented not only as heroes and warriors but also as intellectuals, protectors of scribal knowledge, and brilliant rhetoricians (chapter 16). Besides these topics, much of the historical knowledge imparted was self-reflective of the scribes and their profession, including proverbs about scribes, letters written by famous scholars, a hymn to the goddess of writing, and of course the texts and dialogues dealing with the Edubba'a itself.

Beyond the knowledge transferred via literature, students likely also learned to appreciate and compose literature (chapter 16). But formulating and composing texts comprise one of the least understood aspects of Babylonian education. While we acknowledge that most written documentation was composed by scribes, we often dissociate scribal training and text composition. The fact that most

Mesopotamian literature lacks a named author does not help the matter. In his letter to King Šulgi, Abba'indasa states, "I am a scribe—I can inscribe a stela" (line 15). A look at the letters of the *Sumerian Epistolary Miscellany* reveals that scribes composed letters to the king by reusing elements of hymns they studied at school. So we can assume that studying varied literature, inscriptions, and letters provided the students of the Edubba'a with the foundational knowledge to compose Sumerian literature from blueprints for common genres and also to formulate ideas for narratives, use stylistic elements, and apply an elevated vocabulary. While some of the literature assigned for study originated outside the Edubba'a, a significant portion of it was likely composed by teachers for their students.

The astonishing multidimensionality of many of the exercises in the Edubba'a bears witness to the creativity and compositional skills of the teachers (or former students of the institution): lists of personal names taught students the basics of cuneiform and how to spell these ubiquitous appellations while also conveying an overview of the pantheon (see chapter 8). Proverbs included valuable lessons in ethics next to humorous puns while introducing students to Sumerian grammar (chapter 11). The short extracts were also ideal for taking home to prove students' progress to parents (chapter 12). A letter could include a lesson in history and calculation (chapter 13) while teaching how to formulate orders—a valuable skill for a future administrator. And a funny and engaging disputation, such as *Two Women* B, conveyed the picture of an ideal woman while training students in the genderlect Emesal necessary for lamentations, as well as rhetoric and court procedure (chapter 20).

Education in the Edubba'a was not comprehensive—it was determined by selection based on emphasis of selected character traits, skills, and knowledge. Furthermore, it was not the end of all learning but rather the beginning of many types of scribal careers, as diverse as they might be. I invite you to explore the school in Babylonia through the objects, texts, and ongoing scholarship that enable us to learn from the Babylonian students themselves.



2

Old Babylonian Nippur in Its Environmental and Historical Settings

Hervé Reculeau

Nippur lies in a strategic position at the center of the Mesopotamian floodplain at the approximate boundary between two slightly different ecological zones that, in the third millennium BCE, also corresponded to the cultural and political regions of Akkad upstream and Sumer downstream (fig. 2.1). Nippur was never the seat of an independent king or city-state; rather, it was a city whose elites, and especially the clergy of Enlil, were courted by all the competing kings who aspired to hegemony over the floodplain. Geography, religion, and politics made Nippur's fortune: its history goes back at least to the Middle Uruk period, in the mid-fourth millennium BCE, and the site was repeatedly occupied as late as the medieval period. However, that long history is marked by a series of disruptions, and the end of the Old Babylonian period is one of them. For the first four centuries of the second millennium BCE, Nippur was the primary religious center of Mesopotamia and an object of courting by the kings of various periods, but also a city whose very existence was threatened by ecological change and the political upheavals that marked the end of the first dynasty of Babylon in the seventeenth century BCE.

A Strategic Location at the Border between Sumer and Akkad

The alluvial plain of Lower Mesopotamia, which was formed by the combined sediments of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, extends from Ramadi southward to the Arabo-Persian Gulf. This large basin of 444,442 square kilometers (171,600 square miles), bordered to the east by the foothills of the Zagros Mountains and to the south by the Gulf, is marked by a very gentle north–south slope and an overall flat topography that masks a heterogeneity of microenvironments. In this arid milieu, which receives only 75–200 millimeters (2.95–7.87 inches) of annual rainfall, dry farming is impossible and the rivers are the only source of water available for agriculture.

Despite its apparent uniformity, Lower Mesopotamia is divided into three main environmental zones, which evolved through time as the alluvial plain expanded southward due to causes both natural (eustatic and fluvial dynamics) and human-made (artificial irrigation and field reclamation/abandonment):

The current landscape of Nippur with the ziggurat of Enlil in the background. Photo courtesy of Andrew M. Wright.



Figure 2.1. Map of Mesopotamia showing the sites mentioned in this chapter. Created by MO. Sources: Esri, USGS.

1. In the north, the river plain (roughly equivalent to ancient Akkad) extends southward to the level of Nippur, and the rivers present strongly meandering channels and well-defined levees that are 2–3 meters (6.5–9.8 feet) higher than the basins they overlook. This configuration allows for easy irrigation through gravity flow, with limited risks of salinization because water-table levels are relatively low. Floods, on the other hand, could be very destructive.
2. Farther downstream, the deltaic plain starts just south of Nippur (fig. 2.2) and covers the central alluvium (roughly equivalent to ancient Sumer). Here the rivers' gradient becomes minimal, and they build low levees that are prone to breaches, creating seasonal marshes and lakes that help reduce the threat of violent floods. The proximity of the water table, on the other hand, means that this area is severely affected by soil salinization.
3. Finally, the marshes (known from the seventeenth century BCE onward as "the Sealand") create an immense, fluctuating wetland that formed the background of the early Sumerian

cities located on its margins (Uruk, Umma, Ur). In recent millennia, these wetlands have been pushed farther downstream as the twin rivers have aggraded their floodplain southward to the present shoreline of the Arabo-Persian Gulf.

In the deltaic plain, human activity and erosion over millennia have contributed to the lower preservation, in height and extent, of levees that would originally have been slightly more substantial than in the river plain. In both regions, the system of raised channels and natural levees led to the development of a landscape of irrigation defined by its "herringbone" pattern, with the river (originally along its natural course but increasingly artificialized over time) running at the center of the levee's crest and short canals (1–3 kilometers, or 0.6–1.8 miles, in length) branching off at regular intervals and running down the slope of the levee to reach the lower-lying fields. River levee soils, made of coarser sediments, offer better drainage and less salinization through seepage but require mechanical devices to be irrigated. They support a wide variety of crops, especially date palms that stabilize the soil with their roots and offer shadow and moisture to low-lying trees and crops. River basin soils downslope have low permeability, drain poorly, and are closer to the water table. They are thus more prone to salinization. Although poorer than levee soils, they are more easily irrigated by gravity flow and were used for growing winter cereals, legumes, flax, and a wide range of vegetables in crop-fallow alternation.

Our understanding of the past climates of Mesopotamia has progressed significantly in recent years with the publication of two high-resolution speleothem records, one from the Gol-e-Zard cave on the Iranian plateau (Carolin et al. 2018) and the other from the Kuna Ba cave in Iraqi Kurdistan (Sinha et al. 2019). Both caves have been dated at high levels of precision using the uranium/thorium method, the former between circa 3200 and 1700 BCE and the latter between circa 2000 BCE and the present. Both records are much more precise chronologically than is commonly the case for paleoclimate proxies, with "slices" in the speleothems covering two to ten or fifteen years at a time and a global uncertainty of the absolute chronology of only twenty-five or thirty years. Although further data will be required to refine the picture, these two records offer reasonable proxies for the climate that prevailed over Upper Mesopotamia and Anatolia during the Old Babylonian period and would have affected the behavior of the twin rivers in the area around Nippur. (Local atmospheric humidity would logically have followed similar trends but was never a crucial component for agriculture in this arid environment.) The end of the third millennium BCE was marked by a significant episode of rapid climate change (the so-called "4.2-kiloyear event"), which caused the aridification of the Upper Mesopotamian plateau, with effects on its land use and settlement patterns that are still debated but were probably significant in this region dominated by dry farming. By contrast, the irrigated agriculture of Sumer and Akkad does not appear to have been affected much, and both the Akkadian and Ur III records (2292–2002 BCE) suggest a healthy agriculture, if somewhat less productive than in Early Dynastic times (ca. 2900–2300 BCE). Paleoclimate records for the Old Babylonian period (2002–1595 BCE) attest the return to wetter conditions in the twentieth century BCE, followed by 350–400 years of highly volatile conditions marked by both frequent instability and limited variability in rainfall, with no identifiable marked pluvial or drought episode until around the transition from the Middle Bronze Age to the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550–1500 BCE). For the early part of the period, changes in settlement patterns are hardly recognizable, but global trends for the second millennium BCE are toward a lower population density and a lesser part played by urban centers as compared with agrarian villages. However, changes in rainfall in the catchment areas of the Tigris and Euphrates could explain why branches of the latter experienced dramatic episodes of avulsion and changes of course



Figure 2.2. The current landscape of Nippur photographed from the top of the ziggurat of Enlil. Photo courtesy of Andrew M. Wright.

during the period, with a significant impact on the occupation of some areas, including Nippur and its surroundings: textual and archaeological evidence indicates that at least since the end of the third millennium BCE, the branch of the Euphrates that ran by Nippur, Uruk, Larsa, and Ur was slowly depleted of water to the profit of a new branch (which would become known as the Arahtum) running by Babylon, Borsippa, and Dilbat, prompting a change in the balance of powers among the cities of the alluvium. To counter the effects of this natural shift, a canal named Ka-sahar was created in the late third millennium to transfer water from the Tigris into the branch of the Euphrates on which Nippur sat. This canal was maintained (and renamed at least once) by various rulers during the Old Babylonian period (Steinkeller 2017b).

Nippur: A Coveted Prize for Isin, Larsa, and Babylon (ca. 2002-1763 BCE)

The position of Nippur at the interface between Sumer and Akkad may explain why it rose to prominence as the primary religious center of early Mesopotamia. While Sumer in the late fourth and early third millennia BCE seems to have been dominated by Uruk and its city goddess Inana, sometime during the Early Dynastic I–II period (ca. 2900–2575 BCE) the primacy shifted to Nippur and its city god Enlil. This shift may have happened under the influence of Kiš, then the dominant polity in what would later become Akkad, if a later tradition is to be trusted that attributes the foundation of Enlil's sanctuary, the Ekur, to one of its early kings, Enmebaragesi. By the Early Dynastic III period (ca. 2575–2300 BCE), Enlil was securely established as the head of the Sumerian pantheon and the patron of royal power. Kings throughout the region started dedicating votive inscriptions in the Ekur. This tradition was only amplified after the conquest of Sumer by Sargon of Akkad (2316–2277 BCE), as he and his successors were the first to use their control of Nippur to justify in religious terms their claim as "king(s) of Sumer and Akkad." During the Sargonic period (2292–2173 BCE), Enlil became the imperial god and his son Ninurta was promoted to city god of Nippur, a situation that



still prevailed in the Old Babylonian period. Both the Sargonic kings and their successors of the Ur III dynasty (2110–2002 BCE) sponsored restorations of the city's various sanctuaries. After the reforms of Šulgi (2094–2046 BCE), Nippur and its satellite towns played a central role in the kingdom. First, Nippur was the seat of a province, and Puzriš-Dagan centralized all the taxes in livestock before reallocating them throughout the kingdom (including to the temple of Enlil in Nippur). Second, Nippur, Enlil, and the Ekur played a key role in the theology of power of the kings of Ur, who were coronated in Nippur even before they were crowned in their own political capital, Ur, or in the city associated with the dynasty's origins, Uruk (Sallaberger 1996). Moreover, the nearby settlement of Tumal played a crucial role in cultic activities that involved the royal family. It was therefore no small feat when, in the face of persistent troubles, the last king of the dynasty, Ibbi-Sin (2028–2003 BCE), was forced to send one of his high officials, Išbi-Erra, to secure Nippur and Isin (27 kilometers, or 16.7 miles, southeast of Nippur). Having established himself in Isin, Išbi-Erra (2019–1987 BCE) soon rebelled and became independent from Ur, establishing the first "Old Babylonian" kingdom, which partly overlapped with the last years of the Ur III dynasty. At Nippur itself, this shift in allegiance (the first in a long series) does not seem to have been particularly noteworthy, and the archives of the Inana temple span the periods of both Ur and Isin domination without a sign of discontinuity. Nippur's importance to Išbi-Erra's newly established kingship is visible in his choice of the Nippur calendar as the official calendar of his kingdom after he abandoned that of his former overlord.

Although Isin appears to have controlled most of the alluvium after Ur fell to an Elamite raid in 2002 BCE, a competitor soon rose in Larsa, downstream on the Euphrates. While later traditions claimed, for propagandistic purposes, that the local dynasty was even older than that of Isin, its first historically attested king is Samium (1976–1942 BCE). Not coincidentally, after having extended his dominion over Uruk and other southern cities, Samium seems to have targeted Nippur, for there are indications that his contemporaries in Isin, Iddin-Dagan (1976–1956 BCE) and Išme-Dagan (1955–1937 BCE), temporarily lost control of the city. (See Charpin 2004 for the reconstruction

Overview of the Old Babylonian Kings of Isin, Larsa, and Babylon

Isin	Larsa	Babylon
Išbi-Erra (2019–1987 BCE)		
Šu-ilišu (1986–1977 BCE)		
Iddin-Dagan (1976–1956 BCE)	Samium (1976–1942 BCE)	
Išme-Dagan (1955–1937 BCE)		
	Zabaya (1941–1933 BCE)	
Lipit-Eštar (1936–1926 BCE)		
	Gungunum (1932–1906 BCE)	
Ur-Ninurta (1925–1898 BCE)		
	Abi-sare (1905–1895 BCE)	
Bur-Sin (1897–1876 BCE)		
	Sumu-El (1894–1866 BCE)	
		Sumu-la-El (1880–1845 BCE)
Lipit-Enlil (1875–1871 BCE)		
Erra-imitti (1870–1863 BCE)		
	Nur-Adad (1865–1850 BCE)	
Enlil-bani (1862–1839 BCE)		
	Sin-iddinam (1849–1843 BCE)	
		Sabium (1844–1831 BCE)
	Sin-eribam (1842–1841 BCE)	
	Sin-iqišam (1840–1836 BCE)	
Zambiya (1838–1836 BCE)		
Iter-piša (1835–1832 BCE)	Ṣilli-Adad (1835 BCE)	
	Warad-Sin (1834–1823 BCE)	
Urdukuga (1831–1828 BCE)		
		Apil-Sin (1830–1813 BCE)
Sin-magir (1827–1817 BCE)		
	Rim-Sin (1822–1763 BCE)	
Damiq-ilišu (1816–1794 BCE)		
		Sin-muballit (1812–1793 BCE)
		Hammu-rabi (1792–1750 BCE)
		Samsu-iluna (1749–1712 BCE)
		Abi-ešuh (1711–1684 BCE)
		Ammi-ditana (1683–1647 BCE)
		Ammi-ṣaduqa (1646–1626 BCE)
		Samsu-ditana (1625–1595 BCE)

After Charpin 2004.

of political events here and below.) From the very beginning, Nippur was thus at the heart of the Isin-Larsa rivalry, which came to dominate the power games in the alluvium until the early eighteenth century BCE. The reason for Nippur's importance lies in the fact that kings could claim the title "King of Sumer and Akkad" only when they had been recognized as legitimate by the clergy of Enlil, who in exchange received substantial benefits and revenues from royal patronage in the form of votive offerings,

dedications to the temples, and the (re)building of various religious centers on the site—the Ekur (fig. 2.3) first and foremost, but also other centers whose vestiges have been partially recovered by archaeologists, such as the temple of Inana (fig. 2.4). Besides the aforementioned title, these shifts in allegiance can be traced through various other clues. For example, the cuneiform tablets written (and recovered) at Nippur itself are dated according to the year names of whichever kingdom it was a part of at the time of redaction (year names being a dating system by which every new year was named after a notable event—military, religious, etc.—of the preceding year); in addition, the inscriptions dedicated in the Ekur, as well as mentions of the city and its temples in the kings' year names, reflect whoever controlled Nippur at any given point in time.

Later in his reign, Išme-Dagan reconquered the city and bestowed on its inhabitants an exemption from tax and military service that may have been part of his strategy to lure the local elites back into Isin's orbit. A literary composition, the *Lament for Nippur* (**cat. no. 108**), was possibly also composed on this occasion. In the following decades, Nippur changed hands between the two hegemons, following whichever one appeared to be the more powerful but apparently without ever being forcefully conquered. Thus Lipit-Eštar of Isin (1936–1926 BCE) apparently lost the city to Gungunum of Larsa (1932–1906 BCE), which led to the integration of hymns to this king into the Nippur school curriculum (*Adab to Nanna for Gungunum* [Gungunum A] and/or *Hymn to Nanna for Gungunum* [Gungunum B]). Gungunum lost the city back to

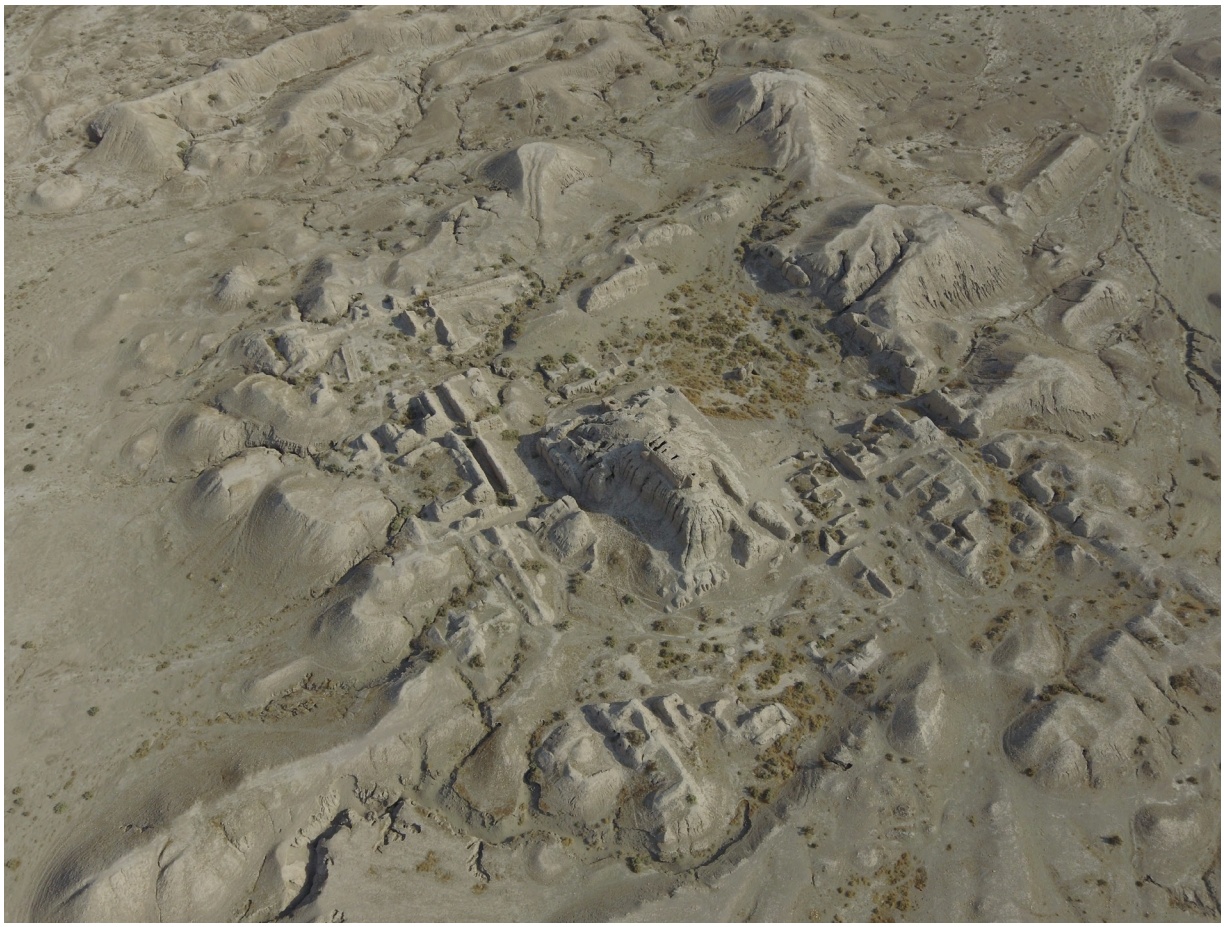


Figure 2.3. Aerial view of the Ekur, the temple and ziggurat of Enlil. Photo courtesy of Abbas Alizadeh.