Cuneiform Artefacts from Iraq

Edited by
Enrique Jiménez and Walther Sallaberger

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Cuneiform Artefacts from Archaeological Contexts: New Research on Ancient Iraq

Proceedings of a Conference Held at the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities, July 4–5, 2024

Edited by Walther Sallaberger and Anna Krisztina Pintér

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Illustration on the cover: The perfect archaeological context: Cuneiform tablets in the vessel KEM22B-i203, discovered in a Middle Assyrian house at Kemune. © Kemune Project Archive, with kind permission. Photo by Peter Pfälzner.

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Foreword

This volume publishes papers originally delivered at the conference 'Cuneiform Artefacts from Archaeological Contexts: New Perspectives', held July 4–5, 2024, on the premises of the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities, BAdW) in Munich. The conference and this volume were organised in the frame of the long-term research project 'Cuneiform Artefacts from Iraq in Context', directed by Walther Sallaberger and Enrique Jiménez, and funded by the Academies' Programme of the Union of the German Academies of Sciences and Humanities, and based at Munich at Ludwig Maximilians Universität (LMU) and BAdW.

We are indebted to the Bavarian Academy and its President, Professor Markus Schwaiger, and the Secretary of Section I, Professor Henrik Birus, for their benevolent support. The project and the conference owe a great deal to the constant guidance, openness to dialogue, and dedicated backing of Dr. Johannes Bernwieser. We are grateful to the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung for the generous funding of this conference. At the conference, the chairpersons Nele Ziegler, Piotr Steinkeller, Daniel Schwemer, Hanan Alessawi, and Helen Gries directed and motivated discussions.

The conference benefited from the professional organisation and personal care by Dr. Benjamin Schönfeld of BAdW and Susan Radwan of our Institut für Assyriologie und Hethitologie at LMU. We thank them and a dedicated group of students for their effective and much-welcome help.

Finally, we thank Harrassowitz Verlag represented by Stephan Specht and especially Julia Guthmüller for professionally bringing the second volume in our CAI (Cuneiform Artefacts from Iraq) series to publication.

Munich, April 2026

Walther Sallaberger
Anna Krisztina Pintér

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Conventions

The system of references to secondary literature and to cuneiform texts basically follows the guidelines of 'Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie'. The abbreviations used are those of the 'Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie'. Accentuation is indicated by italics, not bold type.

The rules for transliterations basically follow the standard of W. von Soden, Akkadisches Handwörterbuch (Wiesbaden 1956–1981). The notation of Mesopotamian measures follows M. Powell, Maße und Gewichte, RlA 7 (1987) 457–530.

Ancient dates apply the standard system 'king year/month/day', and modern dates are given in the same sequence.

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Umma Tablets from Archaeological Contexts: The City Centre in the Old Babylonian Period after the Iraqi Excavations of 1999–2002

Abstract: For more than a century, cuneiform artefacts from the site of Jokha (or Yokha), ancient Umma, mostly dating to the third millennium, were excavated in illicit lootings (after 1894, 1911, c. 1995, and 2003). Archaeological exploration at Jokha started with the forgotten first soundings of J. P. Peters in 1890. A substantial corpus of cuneiform artefacts from the regular excavations of the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities of 1999 to 2002 is becoming available, and therewith, Umma is emerging as a city of the Early and Middle Old Babylonian periods. This contribution focuses on the findspots and discusses the assemblages of written artefacts. A decisive factor for the preservation of unbaked tablets was their protection from physical destruction and water, especially in loose, water-permeable fillings, protected by higher floor levels, in intact buildings.[1]

1 Cuneiform artefacts from Jokha: soundings, lootings, excavations

1.1 Introduction

The ancient city of Umma, the modern site of (Tell) Jokha (Ǧūḫa, pronounced also *Yokha*), is one of the largest urban centres of Early Babylonia with an estimated city area of 262 hectares (Ur 2014, 328). The high number of cuneiform tablets looted at Jokha (Al-Mutawalli 2009, 53; Ur 2014) has made Umma one of the better-studied cities for the third millennium. The Iraqi excavations from 1999 to 2002 have considerably changed the understanding of the site and its written heritage, which is the focus of this article. Whereas previously Umma was considered a city of the third millennium, a large part of the tablets and bullae found in the excavations date to the Old Babylonian period (Early and Middle Old Babylonian),[2] from the time of Sumuel to early Samsuiluna (ca. 1900 to 1750 BCE); this will be taken up in

1 This article was written within the framework of our project dedicated to the publication of the tablets from the Main Tell excavated by the Iraqi excavations 1999–2002. Nawala Al-Mutawalli expresses her gratitude to the General Director of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage for the permission to publish the cuneiform bullae and tablets from Umma. Therefore, the authors are most grateful to Dr. Abdulamir Al-Hamdani, Minister of Culture, Tourism, and Archaeology, Dr. Qais Hussein Rashid, Dr. Laith Majeed Hussein, Mr Ali Obaid Shalgham, Deputy Ministers of Culture, the presidents of SBAH and of the Iraqi Museums, and to the directors of the Iraq Museum Dr. Ahmed Kamil Mohammed and Mrs. Luma Yass Alduri for their constant support of this project. With regard to the Umma excavations of 1999–2002, we thank our colleague Hamza Shahad Al-Harbi for his cooperation in directing the expedition in 2001–2002 and for granting permission to publish the cuneiform texts from the third and fourth excavation seasons to Dr. Nawala Al-Mutawalli. To Khawla Maarij and Hayat Kadhim, we owe supplementary information about the site. We gratefully acknowledge the funding of our cooperation project by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung.

2 Note the terminology: Old Babylonian = 2000–1600 BCE (historically 2003–1595 BCE), divided into Early Old Babylonian = 2003–1823 BCE, Middle Old Babylonian 1822–1712 (Rīm-Sîn I to Samsuiluna), Late Old Babylonian = 1712–1595.

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Section 2 below. Most of the early-second-millennium artefacts come from different buildings in the Main Tell excavations, and these finding contexts will be presented in Section 3. The artefacts from archaeological contexts allow new perspectives, two of which will be addressed in Section 4: first, a comparison of the assemblages of cuneiform artefacts from the two centres of urban life, the Šara Temple and the Administrative Complex, and second, the 'repatriation' of looted tablets to the site of Umma or even a precise area within the city.

1.2 The discovery of Jokha: From the first explorers to the first soundings by John Punnett Peters in 1890, and subsequent lootings from 1894

When and how did the site of Jokha become known as a site with cuneiform tablets? This aspect appears to have escaped scholarly attention completely, and it is not addressed in the recent accounts of Umma's rediscovery (e.g., Ur 2014, 327; Molina 2023, 47–48; Al-Mutawalli et al. 2024, 5). In the early literature, Jokha was sometimes spelled Yokha, since the local dialect uses the latter pronunciation, as it is still the case in the region (Yokha Loftus 1857, 116; *Yokha* and *Jokha* Peters 1897, vol. 2, index; Andrae 1902, 19). William K. Loftus was probably the first explorer to visit the site in 1854, and he sent back to England a stone statue found there (Loftus 1857, 116).[3] The report of W. K. Loftus with his maps was studied by others, including William H. Ward, who shortly saw the site in January 1885, describing it in the manner of the time as a large burial ground, and based on the find of a 'flint saw' estimated it an ancient site (report printed fittingly, as we will see, as Appendix F *apud* Peters 1897, vol. 1, here p. 333). The reports by Loftus and Ward had made Jokha an attractive target for explorers, being an unknown site to be reached with difficulty only. The American John Punnett Peters, who had started Philadelphia's excavations at Nippur in 1888, came to Yokha (or Jokha) during a short trip to Tello and its region. The one-hour visit on April 3, 1889, impressed him, noting especially that glazed sherds, the typical sign for later occupation, were absent:

> The mound was extensive, but low, and half-covered with the sand. […] There were no glass fragments nor remains of glazed pottery on the surface of the mound. We found a couple of brick walls cropping out, and a double well of pottery, or such at least it appeared to be. There were great quantities of stone fragments on the mound, some of them having worked surfaces; and one large piece we found on which the worked face had been destroyed intentionally, as though to efface something. The stone used was very various, and must have come from a number of different places. The bricks which we saw looked ancient, but were uninscribed. I picked up a few pieces of copper on this mound. The ruins seemed to me, so far as I could judge from the surface indications, ancient, and not built upon in later times; but it would be a place difficult to excavate […]. (Peters 1897, vol. 1, 272; see also Ur 2014, 327)[4]

3 Reade (2000, 84) proposed to identify it with BM 90929, ex-12058.

4 This description is so close to the one of Andrae 1902 (see below) who visited the area of the Temple of Šara that there remains little doubt that Peters describes the same area. All features, the worked stone fragments and the brick walls, the well being perhaps small rooms or the water shafts on the outer wall, fit well to the situation of the temple, plundered when the Iraqi team started their work there (Al-Mutawalli 2009; Al-Mutawalli/Al-Harbi 2019).

Peters addressed this visit when he returned to Constantinople after the first Nippur season the same year, in his conversations with Osman Hamdi Bey ('Hamdy Bey'), director of the Archaeological Museum and responsible for the antiquities in the Ottoman Empire:

> I told him [i.e. Hamdy Bey] of my visit to Yokha and other places, and he suggested to me that I might, under the law, make *sondations*, or tentative explorations, at all such places, to determine whether scientific explorations would or would not be profitable. (Peters 1897, vol. 2, 4)

After a visit to Philadelphia to secure funding there, Peters prepared the second campaign at Nippur in autumn 1889.

> As already stated, I left Constantinople in perfect agreement with Hamdy Bey, and enjoying his full confidence. I was authorized to make *recherches scientifiques*, or tentative excavations, at such mounds as I might wish, for the purpose of determining whether or not it would be desirable to conduct fuller excavations there. This permission was to have been given me in writing, but, after the Turkish method, at the last moment, I was informed that no writing would be necessary, and that the verbal permission would suffice. (Peters 1897, vol. 2, 8)

Permissions of this kind allowed the early explorers to conduct test soundings. Peters did so, as he had wished, at Jokha at the end of his second Nippur campaign, in May 1890. His report conveys many details on the travel, searching for water, food and a secure resting place, or fighting robbers in this unsafe region. Before they left the evening of the first day at Jokha, Peters excavated the first tablets:

> I made the best use of my time while they were catching and loading the mules, and Abbas and I worked hard with our picks and scrapers. At last, quite close to the surface, we found an inscribed tablet of unbaked clay, then another, and another. Then we found a fine and very curious tablet of well-baked clay of the most ancient period. Soon we had two or three more similar tablets. (Peters 1897, vol. 2, 283)

> When we finally started [to leave the site in the evening,] my pockets were full of as many beautiful tablets of baked clay as they could carry, and several more were carefully buried in a sand heap near the place where we had been digging. Of course we were full of excitement, because here on a ruin mound never before explored, whose ancient name even was unknown, we had found inscribed tablets, at least four thousand years old, in a most beautiful state of preservation, ready to reveal to us we knew not what secrets of antiquity. We had not expected quite such a success as this from a little surface-scratching of an ancient mound. (Peters 1897, vol. 2, 284)

The next day, Peters and his companions excavated more tablets in their *sondation* at the site that was 'never before explored', and they 'carried off a whole box of tablets' (ibid. p. 285). At Umm al-Aqarib, a site also described as covered by burials, Peters discovered one 'Old Babylonian' tablet (ibid. p. 287). The Jokha tablets were dated by 'Hilprecht and Pognon' 'to be older than 2000 B.C.', and they 'seem to contain business contracts and records, but, unfortunately, like the door socket from the temple of Marduk, they also fail to mention the name of the city' (ibid. p. 280). Regarding the latter object, Peters notes that 'the University of Pennsylvania possesses an inscribed door-socket of the same period' with an inscription of Šu-Suen (read 'Gimil-Sin'), and the god had been identified as 'Marduk' by Hilprecht (ibid.

p. 280); therefore, 'Marduk' stands for Šara in Peters' description. It remains unclear when this stone door-socket was found and brought to Philadelphia. In another context, Peters names it together with the tablets: 'The University of Pennsylvania possesses a door socket from Yokha of about 2600 BC and tablets of approximately the same date' (ibid. p. 171).

As the report and the chronological framing of the exploration suggest, the tablets from Umma must have been sent to Philadelphia together with the finds from the second season of Peters' Nippur excavations. This assumption is confirmed by the data from the online catalogue of the Penn Museum: it includes 54 tablets as coming from 'Tell Jokha' or 'Yokha' in the collection from the second season at Nippur, 1890.[5] David I. Owen (1982, pp. 18–21. 27–28), classifies a few more Ur III tablets from Umma, namely 68.[6] Not all of the attributions in the two lists may stand a careful investigation,[7] and perhaps other texts turn out to be from Umma.[8] Such confusion can perhaps be ascribed to the various repackings of the cargo from Umma or Nippur to Philadelphia in 1890. The door-socket mentioned repeatedly by Peters as found in Jokha, and stored in Philadelphia, must be CBS 14550 (RIME 3/2.1.4.16, ex. 2), which is registered under the label of the first four Nippur expeditions 1888 to 1900.[9] It is one of the door-sockets excavated in the ruins of the Šara Temple of Umma before the Iraqi excavations (Al-Mutawalli/Sallaberger 2025).

The soundings by Peters in 1890, the first legal excavations at the site of Jokha, ancient Umma, were typical for their time. As often articulated by Peters (1897), then, a historian's interest in the newly discovered world of ancient Mesopotamia was driven to discover sites, name them and attribute them and their buildings to rulers and periods. On the other hand, the work of Peters at Jokha may have encouraged some local inhabitants to follow his example and excavate tablets that could then be sold. Only four years after Peters had left, the first tablets arrived in the British Museum, the first address for antiquities in these years. There, ca. 170 documents from Umma were registered in the decade between July 1894 (Sale Documents 94**) and May 1905 (PPAC 5, 1758).[10] Jean-Vincent Scheil was also

5 The museum numbers range from CBS 9039 to 9046, from CBS 9144 to 9183, and from CBS 11111 to 11133 (https://www.penn.museum/collections/accessionlot.php?irn=5881; accessed 2025/10/05).

6 Between CBS 9030 and 9085, CBS 9130, CBS 9143 and 9181, CBS 11111 and 11129

7 E.g., CBS 9182 and 9183 (= BE 6/2, 32 and 8), noted as Jokha tablets on the Penn Museum website (and on CDLI as well), are from Nippur.

8 BE 6/2, 8 must be labelled in the museum as coming from Umma, since Poebel (1909, p. 1), acknowledges this findspot with the reference to Peters (1897) discussed above. However, the personal names or a priestess of Šuziana point to Nippur, not Umma. A more in-depth investigation is necessary for the group of grain accounts in the same range of numbers, discussed by Whiting (1979, 30–31) and Steinkeller (2010, 370); the numbers named by both are BE 3/1, 59 = CBS 11203, 100 = CBS 11240, and 104 = CBS 11243; only by Steinkeller BE 3/1, 83 = CBS 11181, 84 = CBS 11172, and 103 = CBS 11241; only by Whiting BE 3/1, 32 = CBS 11248! ('1124'), 33 = CBS 11256, 34 = CBS 11259, and 45 = CBS 11193. Whereas Whiting (1979, 31) includes CBS 9155–69 and 11111 in this group, which are from Umma and registered under the second Nippur season in 1890, Steinkeller separates the groups. The online catalogue of the Penn Museum does not indicate their registration as part of the Nippur excavations, but Myhrman (1910, p. 9) states that the tablets published by him in BE 3/1 (except BE 3/1, 132 and 155, both bought) were excavated during the first three seasons of the Nippur expedition, with eight tablets from the first, 25 tablets from the third season. According to Myhrman (1910, p. 9), BE 3/1, 84 (= BCS 11172) is from the first season, and three more tablets (BE 3/1, 151 = CBS 11174, 1 = CBS 11176, 66 = CBS 11177) fall in the spans from CBS 11172 to 11203 and 11240 to 11259 which comprise the grain documents. A more careful study, therefore, is necessary to disentangle Nippur and Umma tablets.

9 https://www.penn.museum/collections/object/32412.

10 Based on a research for registration dates for the years from 1893 to 1911 in CDLI (2025-10-05).

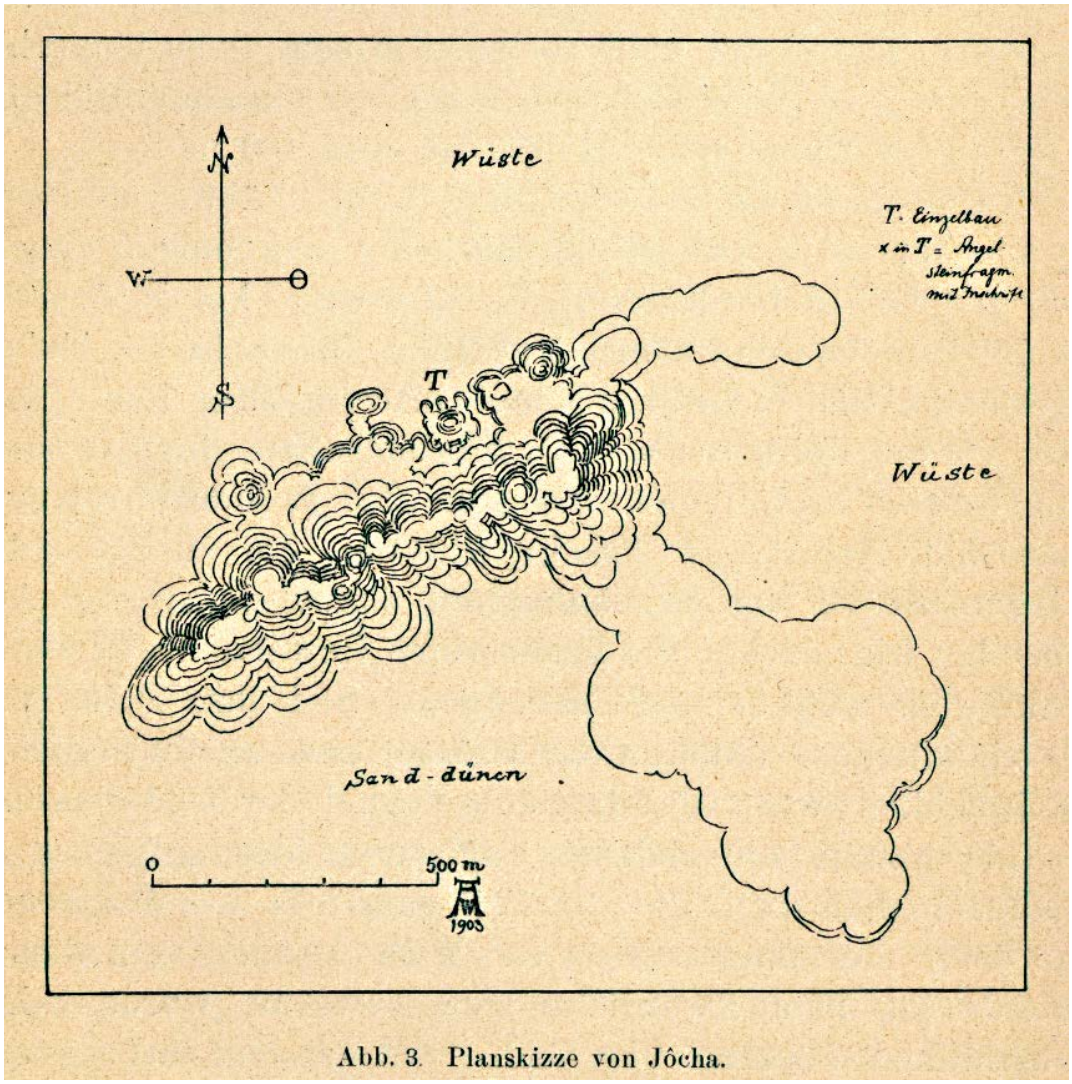

Abb. 3. Planskizze von Jôcha.

Fig. 1. *The first map of Umma. Walter Andrae, MDOG 16 (1902) 21, Fig. 3*

involved in these discoveries of the 1890s (Molina 2023, 47; Al-Mutawalli et al. 2024, 5; Charpin 2023, 190 fn. 9). From this first phase, at least 22 Early Old Babylonian letters and nine bullae found their way to museums, especially the British Museum (Al-Mutawalli et al. 2024, 6–7). As we will see below (Section 4.2), it is most likely that the tablets and bullae from the 1890s derive from the Main Tell area of the Iraqi excavations. Was this also the place where Peters had made his *sondations*?

1.3 From Walter Andrae's visit of 1902 to the lootings of 1911 and the 1920s

The next important visitor was Walter Andrae, who came to Umma from Fāra in late December 1902 and drew the first sketch map of the site (Andrae 1902, 16; Fig. 1). He did not note any clandestine digs there. Like Peters, he emphasised the antiquity of the site and the presence of stone fragments. This was especially true for the square field marked 'T' (probably for 'Tempel') on his map, which, a century later, was excavated and identified as

the temple of Šara, with baked bricks of the format and character as described by Andrae (Al-Mutawalli 2009; Al-Mutawalli/Al-Harbi 2011). Andrae could not resist bringing with him a fragmentary door-socket from the southern corner of the building, whose present whereabouts are unknown, however.[11]

The first period of heavy lootings of Ur III tablets started in 1911. The beginning was announced by François Thureau-Dangin laconically:

> Après Dréhem, Djokha. Des fouilles clandestines, récemment pratiquées à Djokha, ont mis au jour des tablettes qui, comme celles de Dréhem, remontent à l'époque d'Ur. (Thureau-Dangin 1911, 152)

Manuel Molina (2023, 47) counted almost 32,000 catalogued Ur III tablets that came from this intensive phase of lootings.

It is hard to find out how long written objects were mined at Umma. The First World War surely interrupted the trade, and so 1911 to 1914 may be considered the years of the most intensive activities.[12] In the same period, one also found earlier tablets. Benjamin R. Foster (1982, 1–2 and 6–7) demonstrated that Sargonic tablets appeared on the antiquities market in three groups, in or after 1911 (Umma A), in 1925 (Umma C), and in 1929 (Umma B). Whereas the first group, the Early Sargonic Umma A 'archive', was thus excavated with the Ur III tablets and, therefore, probably in a similar area, the Classic Sargonic Umma C and the Early/Middle Sargonic Umma B groups must definitely have come from other find-spots.[13] The same B. R. Foster (2020, 2) noted that most of the Presargonic and Sargonic tablets from Umma and housed at Yale, were purchased in the 1930s and 1940s from Iraqi families. These may have remained with the dealers for some years and not have come from fresh lootings.

Interestingly, no post-Ur III tablets have yet been traced among the Umma artefacts excavated there by looters in the years after 1911 or in the 1920s.

1.4 Renewed lootings c. 1995–1999

The establishment of the Kingdom of Iraq in 1921 and the first Antiquities Law of 1924 had not completely stopped the illegal lootings, but with the first Iraqi Director of Antiquities in 1934, Sati al-Husri, and his efforts to control the land's antiquities, the flow of tablets from Iraq to collectors mainly in Europe and the USA largely dried up (Bernhardsson 2005, Chapter 5; Gibson 2006, 249).

Considering the richness of Iraq in cuneiform tablets and the situation of the illegal antiquities market in other countries, and comparing it with the decades before and after,

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11 The only door-socket for Šu-Suen's Šara temple preserved in Berlin, VA 3855 (RIME 3/2, 1.4.17, ex. 6), was acquired by Géjou on July 21, 1911, as the *Erwerbungsbücher* state (https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/smb_iv_vam-b_slg_nc_02602-04283_lz_1889-1913/0195); 1911 was the first year of the large-scale lootings at Umma (see above). Manfred Krebernik has kindly communicated us that nothing from Umma was noted in Andrae's list of the finds from Fara (p.c.).

12 Arrivals of Ur III Umma tablets in the British Museum started in 1911, but were especially frequent in 1913, and still happened in 1914 (until BM 113170). Then, no tablets from Umma were registered until the year 1919 with ca. two hundred tablets (numbers starting with BM 113654), and after 1920, only a few tablets were registered in some years (1923, 1928, 1932). Agnete Wissen kindly informed me (p.c.) that apparently most Umma tablets in the Yale Peabody Museum stem from the early years (starting with 1911) as well.

13 Although the Iraqi excavations from 1999 to 2002 discovered some Sargonic tablets as well, no coherent assemblage of that period was unearthed in the investigated areas.

remarkably few tablets appeared on the antiquities market between the late 1930s and the early 1990s. But after the First Gulf War in 1991, from the mid-1990s on, political and economic conditions in Iraq had fostered a revival of illicit excavations with antiquities sold worldwide. Again, Umma was one of the most heavily destroyed sites (e.g., Brodie 2006). The Ur III tablets that entered private collections after 1996 generally shared characteristics of documents known from the earlier lootings, but there also appeared different dossiers, which may have come from lootings at other nearby sites. For the Early Dynastic and Sargonic tablets from the looting period c. 1996 to 1999, one uses more carefully the term 'Umma region', meaning 'Umma and its region'. Many of the looted tablets have been confiscated by the Iraqi authorities, or they were returned to Iraq in the past decade due to the adjustment of law regulations concerning the antiquities trade (Brodie 2006). Therefore, the Iraq Museum has become now the main collection for the post-First Gulf War lootings.

1.5 The Iraqi excavations 1999–2002

In an effort to regain control of the archaeological sites with most lootings, the Iraqi State Board of Antiquities, under its Director General Mouayad Said Damerji, sent archaeological teams to five sites: Umm al-Aqarib, Jokha (ancient Umma), Shmet (perhaps KI.AN), Ibzeikh (Zabalam), and, for one season, to Bismaya (Adab). The Iraqi expedition to Umma started in 1999, under the direction of the first author of this article, Nawala Al-Mutawalli, in the first two years, then in 2001–2002 with the co-directorship of Hamza Shahad Al-Harbi. This was the first documented archaeological work in Umma, with the most important archaeological results published soon in the journal Sumer (Al-Mutawalli 2009; Al-Mutawalli/Al-Harbi 2011).

In the excavations, the Iraqi team concentrated first on the flat area below the northern flank of the main ridge, where a large temple was excavated (Fig. 2). Door sockets *in situ* proved that this was the temple of Umma's main god, Šara, built by Šu-Suen of Ur (Al-Mutawalli/Sallaberger 2025). Other door sockets had already been found by visitors and looters early in the twentieth century (including Peters and Andrae), and they ended up in various collections. The clandestine diggers had destroyed much more in the temple, and intact layers were rarely preserved.[14] At two places in the temple, cuneiform artefacts were found *in situ*. Nineteen Ur III tablets lay on the floor of Room 10 close to the southern entrance, and they were published very soon (Al-Mutawalli 2010). But the temple was not the place where all the Ur III tablets had been kept: no others were found in and around the temple.[15] Another assemblage of cuneiform artefacts comes from Room 21, situated near the entrance to the central courtyard, with a door socket of green stone bearing the inscription of Šu-Suen (Al-Mutawalli/Al-Harbi 2011, 49). It belongs to the first plastered floor of the Ur III period, on which 107 bullae and ca. 90 tablets, mostly dating to the time of Sumuel of Larsa, some to the Ur III period, were retrieved (ibid. p. 50; cf. Al-Mutawalli/Al-Harbi 2019, 11). The temple built by Šu-Suen was, therefore, in use one hundred and forty years later. A second and 25 cm higher floor in the same room reveals its continuing life.

The largest area opened by the Iraqi excavation team in 2001 and 2002 was named 'Main Tell', situated south of the Šara Temple (Fig. 2). On top of the massive temenos walls from

14 Beyond the destructions by looters, a large part of the temple had eroded completely, especially the northern and north-eastern area where one expects the cellae. The Slovak team working in Umma since 2016 has started a sounding (labelled '1A') below the eroded platform and found traces of some domestic buildings there (see Hulínek/Hulínkova Ťuchova eds. 2018; Hulínek et al. eds. 2020).

15 The Šara Temple, therefore, may be excluded as the place of Peters' successful first soundings for tablets in 1890.

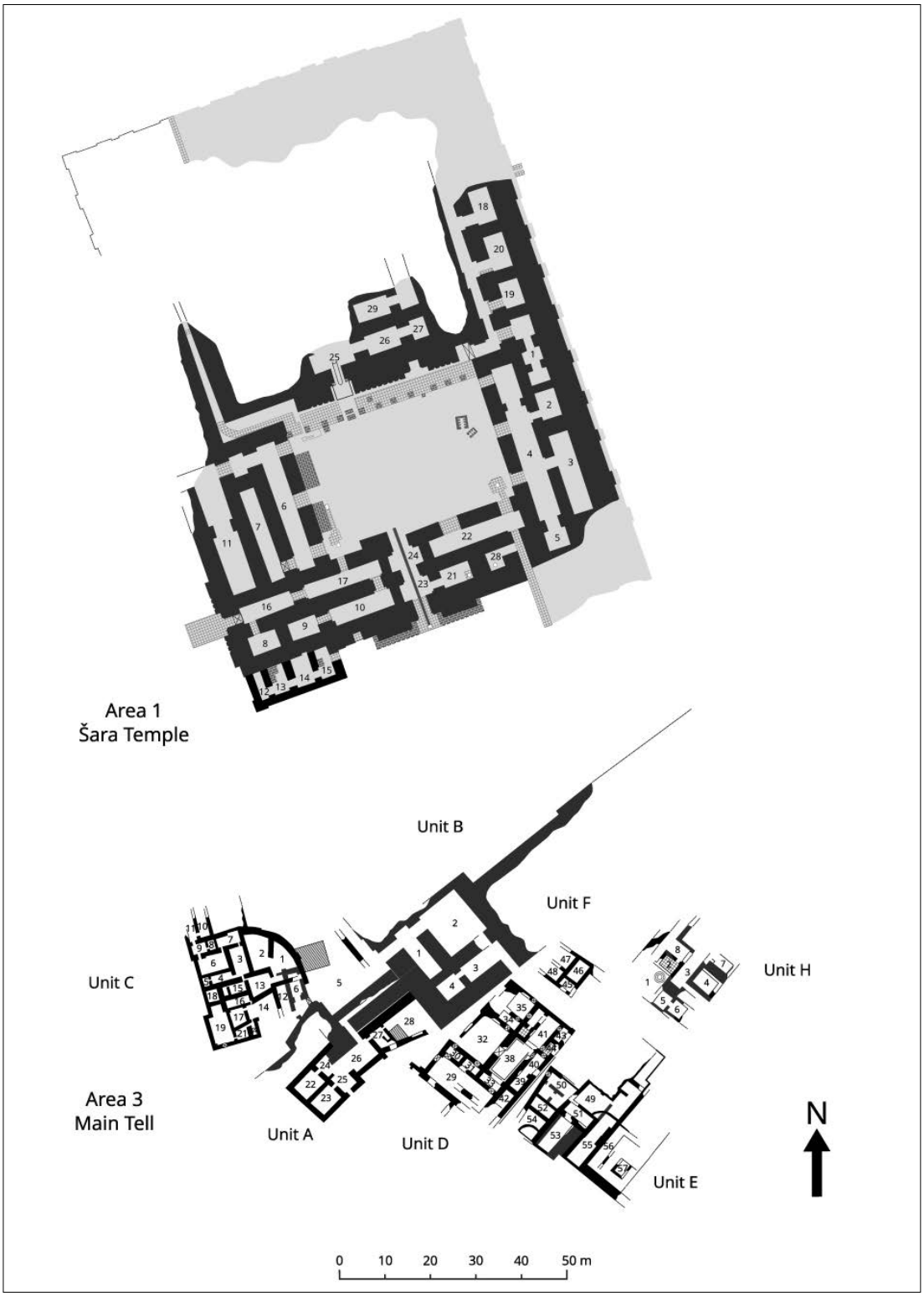

Fig. 2. *The city centre of Umma with remains of the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods, excavated by the Iraqi expedition 1999–2002. Based on the maps published by Al-Mutawalli/Al-Harbi 2011; Al-Mutawalli et al. 2024, 4; georeferenced and drawn by Moritz Kellerer*

the Ur III period, later buildings were erected on a smaller scale. Units A, (B,) and C formed a coherent unit as the finds of bullae have made clear (Al-Mutawalli et al. 2024, 3–5), confirmed by the findspots of tablets. As already noted with the edition of the bullae:

> The absence of *tannur*s, ovens, or cooking pots, and the contents of the cuneiform artefacts found there prove that this was not a residential area, but a building with an official function in the city administration (Al-Mutawalli et al. 2024, 3).

The texts are mostly of an administrative character and can be related to the political centre of Umma. We, therefore, address the building in Units A, (B,) and C together as the 'Administrative Complex'. Rooms for representation may once have been part of this building, but they were not excavated, and so the term 'palace' is not considered appropriate.

The Early and Middle Old Babylonian cuneiform texts from the Administrative Complex will be discussed below in Section 3. Other Old Babylonian texts come from the residential area designated as 'Tell 8' to the west of the Šara temple, and Ur III tablets were collected on the surface and in the heaps left by the looters.

With the pending US-led invasion to start the Second Gulf War, the Iraqi team had to leave Umma hastily late in 2002. Despite the circumstances, Nawala Al-Mutawalli and her team managed to hand over their finds, including the cuneiform artefacts, to the Iraq Museum, and the notes and plans were saved to allow for a speedy publication of the results (Al-Mutawalli 2009; Al-Mutawalli/Al-Harbi 2011).

1.6 From the devastation of 2003 to renewed excavations

During the year-round excavations of 1999 to 2002, the site of Umma was kept safe despite the repeated observations of gangs of looters and occasional fighting. Shortly after the archaeologists had left, the bandits took over again. McGuire Gibson describes the situation when he surveyed the region from a helicopter in 2003:

> Then, on to Umma, where probably 300 men were busily destroying the parts of the site that had been excavated carefully only a few weeks ago by the Iraqi Department of Antiquities. Here, we landed and the military escort shot into the air, scattering the looters. We walked over the site, taking pictures of the ragged pits and tunnels sunk into the rooms already exposed by the archaeologists. As we took off, I could see the tell that is the ancient city of Zabalam in the distance. Though too far off to make a count, it was clear that men were destroying that site as well. The same was true at Umm al-Aqarib, another site that had been excavated until recently by the Department of Antiquities. (Gibson 2003)

Large areas of the site of Umma that had not been touched before were now completely destroyed; heavy looting continued, especially during 2003, but did not stop completely (see the map by Ur 2014, 328). Hopefully, the same high level of site protection will have been reached as between the 1930s and 1990s. The main official collection for the cuneiform artefacts from the latest lootings is, again, the Iraq Museum, sources being confiscations or transfers from illegal collections (well-known is the case of Steve Green's cuneiform collection from the Museum of the Bible in Washington; Brodie 2006). Only relatively few tablets from the antiquities market in the West were published; much material may have disappeared in other parts of the world. Again, Ur III and Sargonic tablets dominate what is known from these lootings. Due to the wide areas destroyed in the same years both at

Jokha and at other sites and the different administrative networks reflected in the texts, the attribution to Umma has often become uncertain, and instead, also for the Ur III tablets, the provenience is mostly indicated as 'Umma region'.

A small-scale archaeological enterprise led by the Slovak team of Drahoslav Hulínek since 2016 has demonstrated that archaeological research is still possible at Jokha (Hulínek/Hulínkova Ťuchova eds. 2018; Hulínek et al. eds. 2020). Their strategy of limited stratigraphic soundings reduces the chances of discovering larger cuneiform assemblages. However, some single tablets from the Ur III, Sargonic, and Presargonic periods were uncovered in their trenches in the centre of the site. These and others to be found will continue to tell the story of the site.[16]

2 The contingency of textual evidence

2.1 'Umma' tablets from lootings and the Warka Survey data for Jokha: the third millennium

Whereas in an ideal situation, the archaeological and the textual evidence found at a site can be combined to investigate the history of a Mesopotamian city (considering, of course, other sources as well), the case at Umma is different: the mass of cuneiform artefacts from lootings can hardly be matched with the uncovered ancient buildings. Furthermore, the chronological distribution is uneven: a huge number of third-millennium written artefacts from Umma (and its environment), with almost no corresponding building remains.

To give some numbers, starting with the earliest texts: For the Early Dynastic period (c. 2900–2300 BCE), CDLI includes almost 800 tablets for Umma and Zabalam. Palmiro Notizia and Giuseppe Visicato (2016, 1–2) enumerate ca. 1000 ED IIIb texts for the same two sites, to which earlier tablets and inscriptions have to be added. The designation as 'Umma' in these cases refers to the region including Shmet, Ibzeikh/Zabalam, and Umm al-Aqarib, and perhaps few, if any, of these written artefacts come from Umma (Jokha). However, one Presargonic tablet was found in the Slovak excavations (Mittermayer 2020, 57 ad TJ19_2A_K54_T1). Although the Lagaš–Umma conflict of the 25th/24th century BCE has made it into history books, and the city-rulers of Umma have become well-known figures, it remains impossible to prove whether, at this period, the city centre of ancient Umma was situated at Jokha or at Umm al-Aqarib (cf. Almamori 2014). In their survey report, Robert McC. Adams and Hans-Jörg Nissen (1972, 227, #197) noted the dominance of Late Early Dynastic pottery in surface collections. Where was it concentrated?

For the period under the dynasties of Akkade and Gutium (2300–2110 BCE), Andreas Johandi (p.c.) has kindly provided me with a provisional number of more than 800 published

16 In the second season of 2017, six tablets (of Sargonic/Ur III date and school tablets) were found both in soundings 2A and 2B southwest of the Main Tell excavation field of the Iraqis, according to Appendix D in Hulínek/Hulínkova Ťuchova eds. (2018). They include one tablet from trench 2B, from context K12, a looting pit (section on Plan 49), and five from 2A, K5, again a looting pit (see sections Plan 45–46, Plan 48). In the third season of 2019, another five tablets were found, described in the report of Hulínek et al. eds. (2020, 57) by C. Mittermayer. According to Appendix D (ibid. p. 200), they again stem from sounding 2A. A group is attributed to the contexts K8 – K53, that form archaeological layers (from top down) according to Plan 38 on p. 191, but perhaps represent only a subdivision of a filling, since the package is not separated by a floor; two 'Sargonic/Ur III' tablets come from K8 (see p. 189, plan 36, p. 193 Plan 40 etc.), one Presargonic from K53 (but 'K54' on p. 57). The tablet from the drain K66 dates to the Sargonic/Ur III period as well (for the context see p. 187, Plan 34), whereas we could not find K19 in the plans of the sections. The tablets will be published by C. Mittermayer and F. Huber-Vuillet.

artefacts (810 tablets plus 16 inscriptions), and again, tablets may stem from various sites (see above). Some Sargonic stray finds were recovered by the Iraqi excavations of 1999–2002, and a few pieces by the Slovak soundings. These single tablets do not form a coherent text group, not comparable to the Umma dossiers reconstructed by Foster (197282?), and nothing suggests that any of the structures exposed at Jokha can be related to this period.

Around 33,387 tablets from the Ur III period, published and catalogued, are labelled as coming from 'Umma' by Manuel Molina's BDTNS (search 2025/10/05); another 461 are indicated as from the 'Umma region', making a total of 33,848 Ur III tablets (Molina 2023, 48: 32.342 tablets). Against this massive documentation, the archaeological data of the Warka Survey provided a less spectacular occupation of Jokha, compared to earlier and later periods: 'Akkadian, Ur III, and Larsa periods also are well represented' (Adams/Nissen 1972, 227 #197).

For Ur III, for the first time, some matches on the site are possible: inscriptions on door-sockets from the Šara Temple identify it as the building erected by Šu-Suen (Al-Mutawalli/Sallaberger 2025), the temple at the centre of religious life at Umma in the period, well-known from the textual record of the Ur III period. On the other hand, in the large area of Šu-Suen's Šara Temple, only one small assemblage of Ur III tablets was excavated (Al-Mutawalli 2010), and this was obviously brought there from another place: The most prominent person in this assemblage, the tanner Ayakala, is well-known from the large Umma corpus pulled out of the earth from 1911 on. The temple, therefore, was not a building involved in the deposition of Ur III tablets.

In what had become their last season, 2002, the Iraqi team came across a dense and almost pure concentration of Ur III fragments in and between the looting pits in Unit H of the Main Tell area, and there can be no doubt that the walls and rooms that had remained after the ransacking by the looters once belonged to an official complex of that period. We hope that an analysis of the excavated documentation will allow us to attribute some dossiers of the already known Ur III texts to this area, but the matter might be more complicated.

The third millennium is represented by a stunning mass of textual data, to which one has to add the numerous references to Umma in sources from other cities. Relying on these, a history of the city can be written (e.g., Waetzoldt 2014). However, besides two buildings from the very end of the millennium (Šara Temple, Unit H), the archaeological counterpart of this history is still missing.

2.2 The recovery of Old Babylonian Umma: new perspectives opened by the Iraqi excavation

The situation is reversed for the Old Babylonian period, the last period of occupation, because survey data indicated the strong presence of an extended settlement at Jokha (Adams/Nissen 1972, 227 #197). Adams (1981, 166 Fig. 33) even represented (Middle) Old Babylonian Umma as a 200+ ha site, larger on his map than Kisurra, Uruk, or even Larsa (see also Adams/Nissen 1972, 37; Ur 2014, 329). The textual evidence known before the Iraqi excavations suggested otherwise. Concerning the Old Babylonian period, Hartmut Waetzoldt (2014, 320) wrote that the reasons for Umma's decline after Ur III were unknown, and only the Aḫum letters indicated agricultural activity on a more modest scale ('in bescheidenerem Rahmen'). Information concerning the temples of the gods was missing, and Waetzoldt (2014, 321) assumed that Šara and Inana of Zabalam were venerated elsewhere. Beyond the observations of Waetzoldt, one has to add that not a single year date or royal inscription from the then-known corpus refers to post-Ur III Umma, and tellingly, the prologue of Ḫammurapi's Code bypasses Umma and moves from Lagaš directly to Zabalam, as if Umma had not existed at that time. The distribution of tablets from lootings supported

the image of Umma's decline after the end of the Ur III period. A search in CDLI for 'Umma' as provenience of Old Babylonian artefacts lists 163 items (last accessed 2025/10/05). Deducing the 107 bullae from the Iraqi excavations published in UmCT 2 and already listed in CDLI, a number of 56 tablets Old Babylonian tablets 'from Umma' remain. However, these are mostly school tablets or mathematical lists of unknown and undetectable provenance, and the label 'Umma' cannot be verified. The list retrieved from CDLI also includes archival texts from Larsa, Isin, and Nippur, but not a single tablet that can confidently be ascribed to Umma.[17] The impression that Umma had declined thus seems to be confirmed by different sets of written sources, but not including those from the Iraqi excavations.

However, CDLI, for example, does not list the published tablets that indeed came from Umma, but they are kept there with the label 'Kisurra', since many Assyriologists have considered this the findspot of the Aḫum letters and some bullae before 2024. We have counted 31 texts from the 1890s, and 15 from recent lootings (Al-Mutawalli et al. 2024, 5–11); other Umma tablets appear here and there (as AUCT 4, 7 and 9, kindly communicated by Zs. Földi, p.c.). Compared to over 33,000 Ur III tablets, some fifty Old Babylonian tablets from early lootings might still indicate a decline.

The Iraqi excavations have considerably changed this picture: in UmCT 2 and 3, we published 384 bullae (107 and 277, respectively), and ca. 330 tablets and tablet fragments from the Administrative Complex are being prepared for publication in the next UmCT volumes. The bulk of the textual documentation, almost all bullae and the large majority of the tablets date to the time of Sumuel (1894–1866 BCE), from ca. 1900 to 1870 BCE. Among the later tablets from the Middle Old Babylonian period, the preserved year dates refer to Warad-Sîn and Rīm-Sîn of Larsa, but these are only six tablets (1 and 5, respectively). Then follows the latest dated tablet from the year Samsuiluna 2 (1748 BCE). As expected, Late Old Babylonian tablets are missing completely.

The early second-millennium assemblages were retrieved at various findspots, including the Šara Temple and the secular centre in the Administrative Complex. With this data at hand, Umma is emerging as a previously unknown city from Sumuel's times (Al-Mutawalli et al. 2019; 2024). This is close to, but not precisely matching, the result of the Warka Survey. Adams/Nissen (1972, 227 #197) identified the 'Old Babylonian' period (largely parallel to Assyriological 'Middle Old Babylonian') as the most prominent period of occupation besides the Late Early Dynastic, whereas the 'Larsa' (our 'Early Old Babylonian') period was 'also present', and thus a slight gap between textual and survey data concerning the flourishing of Umma remains.

2.3 The wealth of Ur III cuneiform documents from lootings: challenges for an evaluation

Since the early days of the field, scholars of ancient Mesopotamia have repeatedly warned not to take the available, impressively large and detailed evidence as representing 'history'. But who could have imagined that at Umma, lootings produced thousands of tablets from earlier periods, but almost nothing from the Old Babylonian period, a time of floruit according to Warka Survey data, which should have been accessible in higher layers? Should one (as, e.g., Waetzoldt 2014) not have trusted the combined evidence of missing data from the site and the silence of external sources?

Now that we are reconstructing parts of the Early Old Babylonian city step by step, some features may be noted that may have contributed to this noteworthy distribution.

17 Archibab is more up-to-date, but at the moment of reviewing this article (last accessed 2025/10/05) was in the process of incorporating UmCT 3 and the results of Al-Mutawalli et al. 2024.

First, despite the continuation of Šara's cult in his temple (Al-Mutawalli et al. 2019) and the recorded dedication of cult objects to Šara in year dates attributable to the local rulers Aḫum and Lipit-Eštar (Al-Mutawalli et al. 2024; Sallaberger in print), not a single inscription on stone or brick from this period was found in the course of excavating the temple and the city-centre, nor by earlier looters. The inscribed stone fragments from the temple date to the Ur III period (foreseen for publication in UmCT 1). Local rulers had not integrated writing as a medium for representation, a situation different from many other cities of the period. Also, Sumuel of Larsa did not interfere in the internal matters of his vassal Aḫum and did not start building projects there.

Second, the looted and the excavated tablets hardly include any legal documents; there are no sale documents, not even loan contracts, among the assemblages from the time of Sumuel, categories that are so frequent at other places in the Early Old Babylonian period (consider, for example, the Mananaya tablets, the early Nippur evidence, or the loans from Kisurra). The few exceptions are telling: a contract dates to Warad-Sîn 11 (1824 BCE, Um. 3471), a sale to Rīm-Sîn 20 (1803 BCE, Um. 3468), a loan to Rīm-Sîn 37 (1786 BCE, Um. 3608), thus decades after the massive documentation that ends around 1870 BCE. As the careful reader may have noted, almost all dated tablets from the Middle Old Babylonian period are, therefore, legal contracts.

Third, and in agreement with the above statement, the Early Old Babylonian cuneiform documentation from Umma from the time of Sumuel is almost exclusively administrative, with some letters sent by the chief officials, and a few legal tablets with a special type concerning surety, related to Umma's leader Aḫum. This might suggest that writing may have been restricted to administrative matters at that period, and the (legal and illegal) excavations had, by chance, not touched the houses. Although we still have to study the tablets from the residential area of Tell 8, the relatively low number of tablets and findspots warns us not to expect extensive 'family archives' there. Finally, it has to be noted that not a single tablet was found in Units E and F.

Aware of the lacunae of the evidence, one hesitates to draw simple conclusions. Writing was perhaps less widespread in Early and Middle Old Babylonian Umma than, for example, in the cities of Ur, Larsa, Isin, or Nippur (Wilcke 2000), but this impression may also depend on the preservation of unbaked clay tablets (see below). In the preserved assemblages, writing was largely confined to administration but was much less used in family matters. Obviously, writing did not appear (much) in the local ruler's representation at Umma (on Aḫum and Lipit-Eštar, see Sallaberger in print).

The excavation of the Administrative Complex by the Iraqi team in 2001 has mitigated the dearth of Old Babylonian cuneiform artefacts from a century of looting. The area was destroyed by looting before, and some related tablets and bullae appeared in other collections (Al-Mutawalli et al. 2024, 5–11); not a single Early Old Babylonian Umma tablet, however, has been noticed in the collections stemming from the large clandestine diggings of 1911. This not only indicates that the looters worked in another area of the city, but that the looters preferred to mine the regularly baked and more attractive Ur III tablets, whereas the unbaked Old Babylonian written artefacts attracted them less. Dominique Charpin (2021, 189–190) has observed this difference, and it explains well the distribution of clandestine cuneiform tablets. At Umma, this strategic choice by looters is confirmed by the destruction executed before 1999: the remains of a building in Unit H are the poor remains left over by the looters' forces, and here, hundreds of often tiny fragments from baked Ur III tablets were collected from the debris, and rarely on the floors. This is in stark contrast to Units A, B, C, and D, where hundreds of Old Babylonian bullae and tablets were found, with only occasionally one or the other Ur III tablet. The rule-of-thumb difference between mostly baked Ur III and unbaked Old Babylonian tablets not only determines their attrac-

tion to looters, but also the state of preservation: unbaked objects crumble more easily and dissolve in water. Finally, even if Umma's Old Babylonian occupation was vast, as indicated by the results of the Warka Survey (Adams/Nissen 1972, Adams 1981, Ur 2014), in many areas within the city, the Old Babylonian layers had eroded, and earlier phases had become accessible directly from the surface. A case in point is the northern flank of the Šara Temple, where even the Ur III foundation had completely disappeared (see Fig. 2).

On the other hand, the Iraqi excavations on the Main Tell concentrated in the third season on an area which was less devastated by looting pits. They discovered cuneiform artefacts of the Early and Middle Old Babylonian periods, with only sporadic Ur III tablets here and there. This ties in nicely with the observation that baked Ur III tablets must have been more attractive to the looters, and now we see why they had spared the area of the Administrative Complex. Only the first treasure-hunters (of the 1890s) and the latest 'armies' of looters that ransacked every spot touched this region.

3 Assemblages of cuneiform artefacts from the Early and Middle Old Babylonian periods

3.1 Terminology first: the ideal of an 'archive', archaeological 'assemblage', and textual 'dossier'

As already mentioned, the bulk of the Early Old Babylonian evidence from the Iraqi excavations stems from the Šara Temple and the Administrative Complex. How should we refer to these groups of cuneiform artefacts? 'Group' is too vague a term, and 'collection' is mostly understood from the perspective of the finder or owner. Although the term 'archive' is commonly used in Assyriology to refer to groups of administrative and legal texts and letters found in one place, this usage is most often not correct in the strict sense of the word.

> Archives were not merely a storage place for 'all kinds of records'. Rather, it is evident that documents placed in an archive were specifically selected for retention. Documents must have been classified by different types, and a selection of these made to identify those for storage. (Brosius 2003, 6)

Maria Brosius then comes up with the definition

> to regard an archive as a room in which documents considered as important to the past and ongoing business of the institution were stored. These were removed from or added to the archive according to the development of affairs. (Brosius 2003, 8)

As we will see in the next section, hardly ever can groups of texts from the Umma excavations be defined as an 'archive' according to this definition, even if they share common features as 'types and shapes', 'text formulae', and 'procedures of record-keeping' (Brosius 2003, 13–14).

Therefore, a more neutral and, on the other hand, specific term is employed, namely the archaeological term 'assemblage', 'a collection of material related through contextual proximity', whereby processes of fragmentation and accumulation lead to the specific composition of (intentional, structured) deposits and assemblages (Joyce/Pollard 2010, citation p. 291).

A series of texts related by their common background in scribal practice is called a 'dossier' or 'file', independently of the respective find contexts. Objects from the same dossier,

therefore, often share features that define a cuneiform artefact as testimony of practices attested in a certain historical situation (see Sallaberger, this volume).

The Iraqi excavations at Umma have uncovered various rooms where an assemblage from a certain findspot comprised dominantly or even exclusively written artefacts from a particular dossier, reflecting shared scribal practices in their production. The subsequent presentation will show that this combination of one dossier in one assemblage does not imply that one deals with archives or the remains of archives.

3.2 Šara Temple, Room 21 assemblage

The Early Old Babylonian assemblage from R.21 near the main entrance of Šara Temple, mentioned in Section 1.5, consists of 107 bullae on the delivery of barley to the temple, received by a collegium of priests (published in UmCT 2), dating from four years before Sumuel 2 to Sumuel 6 (1898–1889), and a much lower number of related tablets (to be studied and foreseen for publication in UmCT 1). Besides the dating and findspot as well as format and layout of the bullae (and, perhaps, the tablets as well), also terminology, prosopography, and function define the Early Old Babylonian bullae and tablets from the Šara Temple as a coherent dossier. Not all items that once belonged to the series of bullae were found, as evidenced by lacunae in the monthly series of regular deliveries (Al-Mutawalli et al. 2019, 24–25). The assemblage, as discovered, was apparently preserved because the upper floor level provided some protection, and the unbaked clay artefacts were never exposed to rainfall. The bullae and tablets may originally have been written and deposited in the same room or in another one nearby. The findspot suggests that the artefacts served as a filling when the floor was elevated after Sumuel 6, the last year attested in the bullae (UmCT 2). The relatively good state of preservation of the bullae, evidenced by the fact that every single object received an IM number, and the low amount of tiny fragments, indicates that the bullae had not been moved around too much after their deposition. The fact that the bullae belong to the same dossier and date to a restricted period of mainly four years (Sumuel 3 to 6), with additional objects from six preceding years, proves that the bullae had been collected for some time, probably knotted together on their strings according to internal principles of grouping, to document the temple's grain income (Al-Mutawalli et al. 2019, 21–25). Therefore, before their final deposit, bullae were considered documents that were kept (perhaps for documentation) in a deposit for some years, and this can be called an archive. Although the data of the bullae may have been transferred to summary documents, the artefacts were not cleaned up every year after the final accounting.

3.3 Administrative Complex: dossier of bullae and Early Old Babylonian artefacts

Administrative Complex: dossier of bullae from R.24, R.1, R.15

The dossier of bullae concerning the administration of small flocks with 257 items was published in UmCT 3 and discussed by Al-Mutawalli et al. (2024). Bullae from this coherent dossier of the urban administration were found in three different rooms, covering subsequent time-spans (Al-Mutawalli et al. 2024, 3–5. 17):

- R.24: 21 bullae over 5 years (1891–1887 BCE)
- R.1: 235 (+ 9) bullae over 11 years (1886–1876 BCE) plus 1 later bulla (< 1874 BCE)
- R.15: 8 bullae from one year (probably 1875 BCE)

The bullae were written as a documentation of the actual losses of small cattle that occurred to a shepherd, and these losses were confirmed by members of an urban council by the impression of their seal. After an inspection of the herds that took place twice a year, the bullae were not any more needed for bookkeeping. Considering the series of documents, however, the office or deposit room was cleaned up only every few years, not after each inspection. They may have been kept as documentation, meaning as an archive for some years (as those from the Šara Temple discussed in the preceding paragraph). The bullae were written by one office and found in three different rooms. In each of the three rooms, other artefacts were found, too. R.24 and R.1 are discussed first, R.15 below in Section 3.3.

R.24, assemblage of bullae on losses of small cattle

From R.24 comes a remarkably pure collection of only bullae dating to a period of five years (Sumuel 4 to 8), including 19 bullae documenting the losses of animal herds (see above), and two the expenditure of flour to people and to the temple of Šara (UmCT 3, 239 and 240). The low number of items indicates that only a small part of an 'original collection' of bullae has survived in this assemblage. The 'original collection' may have consisted of the bullae deposited in one place for a minimum of five years, but not after 1887 BCE. The archival purpose of this 'original collection' is, again, not evident after a review of the herds had taken place, but the bullae were kept, perhaps for documentation, and the room was not emptied every year; this would have made it an archive (Al-Mutawalli et al. 2024, 41–43).

R.1, Layer II, assemblage of tablets and bullae of the central administration

With 235 (or perhaps 244) bullae on animal administration, another seven from the sesame mill and six on other commodities, all published in UmCT 3, and with 247 tablets to be published in UmCT 4 and 5, the cuneiform artefacts from Room 1 represent by far the largest assemblage of the period found by the Iraqi team at Umma. Besides the edited bullae and tablets, the Iraq Museum preserves further tiny fragments that were, for now, postponed in the publication process. Compared to the bullae from the Šara Temple, those from R.1 of the Administrative Complex are less well preserved. The archaeological context explains the preservation of the objects:

> In Room 1, the largest group of bullae and tablets was found in a 1.5-metre thick fill also including fragments of mud bricks, apparently dumped in the room to raise the low floor level to the same height as that of the surrounding rooms. The original low floor had allowed access from the lower temple temenos, but a looting pit has destroyed the location where an entrance door and a staircase can be expected. In this area of Unit C, scant remains of an Old Babylonian building were found above the fill level, labelled as Layer I; therefore, the filling with the bullae and tablets has been identified as Layer II. Although the bullae and tablets come from an originally coherent collection, the fact that they were discarded as fill means that we cannot expect to have recovered a complete series of documents. Furthermore, a large pit from looters leading down below the primary floor level has destroyed the eastern part of R.1. (Al-Mutawalli et al. 2024, 5)

The objects stem mostly, but not exclusively, from the time of Sumuel. The two dated later tablets (dated Warad-Sîn 11 and Rīm-Sîn 20) are intrusive, possibly due to the activities

of looters in this area. The bullae and the tablets are administrative in character, and they define various tasks of the central administration: the control of small cattle herds, the textile industry, personnel lists, the upkeep of the kitchen and the provision of diplomatic messengers; some letter fragments (one from Aḫum) and round exercise tablets were found here as well. The tablets include some large fragments with the tabulation of animal herds, which indicates that the bullae indeed documented losses for the next review. Evidently, to raise the floor of the room, existing deposits of bullae and tablets were cleared out around 1870 BCE (year Umma L+1), with the tablets often from the last decade, the bullae ending in 1876 BCE (see above). The different dossiers mentioned above may, therefore, have been stored in the same building complex, but not in the very same place. The formation of the infill in R.1 from bricks and brick fragments, loose earth, and cuneiform artefacts in between, explains that many artefacts are broken, no adjoining pieces can be found even for large tablet fragments, and probably different previous tablet deposits ended up here. This exceptional context with a huge number of written artefacts in a loose infill, not on a floor, was remembered vividly by the excavator of the room, Khaola Maarij, even twenty years after the excavation (in Munich in summer 2022). This infill, however, provided the best conditions for the preservation of the written artefacts made of unbaked clay. The 1.5 m infill raised the floor level, and this new floor was in a room; the roof and floor protected the buried tablets and bullae. Even after the destruction of the building, the fill with fragments of bricks and loose earth between provided a very good drainage for water, and the clay objects could survive in a relatively dry context.

R.22, the 'Lipit-Eštar' group

The assemblage of 24 tablets from R.22 is, again, a secondary deposit that includes three older Ur III tablets. However, two features stand out: letters to Lipit-Eštar, the short-time king of Umma, addressed as 'my lord' (*bēlī*); and fragments listing fields and their yield, and the only tablet on linen.

3.4 Various assemblages

The Early Old Babylonian period, more specifically the time corresponding to Sumuel of Larsa, ca. 1900 to 1870, is represented at Umma by impressive administrative dossiers, whereas the situation is reversed for the 'Middle Old Babylonian' period, as defined by the long reigns from Warad-Sîn and Rīm-Sîn to Ḫammurapi and Samsuiluna. Excluding the undated lexical and literary texts and the school exercises, no coherent dossier has been preserved for the later period. Single tablets have been listed in the previous section, and they may have been added to assemblages of earlier written artefacts at the time of their last relocation, or, more probably, their findspot could not be recorded more precisely. As already said, the destruction caused by the looters made it almost impossible to define archaeological layers in the usual way during excavation.

R.15, administrative texts, lexical and literary fragments and exercise tablets

15 tablets and 8 bullae from this room cover a time span from Ur III to a tablet date of Rīm-Sîn 32, bullae from the dossier on losses of small cattle dated to 1875 BCE are among the finds,

as are two letters, one of Middle Old Babylonian date. The artefacts all have the same find-spot on the floor, and thus various earlier tablet deposits were used to fill up the floor level.

R.8, administrative texts, lexical and literary fragments and exercise tablets

The assemblage from the floor of R.8 is larger than the one from R.15, with 40 numbers foreseen for the publication. Its range is similar: from a handful of Ur III tablets to the latest dated tablet from Samsuiluna 2.

Remarkably, as in R.15, the assemblage from R. 8 comprised lexical fragments from some large tablets, and it furthermore encompassed a handful of literary fragments, including model contracts, as well as exercise tablets. These are often small pieces, which indicates that the tablets were brought here as a fill to be placed on the floor. Manuscripts of the Umma recension of the Old Babylonian thematic list ('Ur_5-ra') are found in both rooms, and whether two fragments from R.15 and R.8 (Um. 3305a and Um. 3322, respectively) present an indirect join or are manuscripts from the same section of the list cannot be decided. R.8 and R.15 do not border on each other, and thus deposits of tablets from other rooms were brought both to R.8 and to R.15. It is not necessary to hypothesise a second storey to understand the deposits in two rooms.

The retrieval of two assemblages of a once coherent collection of exercise tablets indicates a time lapse after their writing before usage as infill on the floors. Jon Taylor and Caroline Cartwright (2011) argue that exercise tablets usually ended in various kinds of deposits. The fragments from large tablets of lexical lists found in R.8 and R.15 may be seen as debris of the reference copies kept in the scriptorium together with the actual work of scribal apprentices (publication foreseen for UmCT 6).

Tablets were also found in the following rooms of Areas A, B, and C:

- R.3: one single exercise tablet
- R.4: one bulla (UmCT 3, 251), and one tablet dated Rīm-Sîn 42
- R.14: one single tablet, a legal tablet dated Rīm-Sîn 37.
- R.17: two fragments and three bullae inscribed with the name Ilī-iddinam (UmCT 3, 248–250)

Outside of the Administrative Complex, written artefacts appear only in one context in Area D, but none in Areas E and F.

- Area D, R.29: one Ur III tablet, eight Old Babylonian, dealing with different matters; two tiny receipts of flour bear the same seal impression and thus stem from the same dossier.

4 Conclusions

4.1 Assemblages of cuneiform artefacts at Umma

The written artefacts forming dossiers defined by text type, contents, date, and acting persons, thus stemming from a specific task of scribal practice, were often found in particular assemblages as indicated by the rooms and layers. This allows the modern scholar to identify dossiers, even if information on dates or persons is missing. As a good example, one

may point to the assemblages of lexical and literary texts and exercise tablets from R.8 and R.15. The tablets served as infill between floors, and before that, they may have been deposited in a room close by. Despite the relocations, the artefacts were evidently formed and written in the same scriptorium, even if this scriptorium can not any more be defined in the archaeological remains. Perhaps only in R.21 in the Šara Temple, if ever, did the find-spot correspond to the place where the tablets were written.

The single tablets from rooms without any other written artefact were stray finds, and they witness that within otherwise coherent assemblages of written artefacts, further stray finds have to be considered as well in Umma.

Early and Middle Old Babylonian tablets and bullae were often found on floors, and the mixed composition of the assemblages suggests that one usually does not deal with the remains of an original deposit, but that the artefacts were brought there as filling material.[18] Taphonomic considerations support this conclusion. Unbaked tablets crumble easily, and they may have been crushed by people and animals walking by, or by collapsing parts of the building. They dissolve in water, and the rain falling in a ruined house without a roof and forming puddles of water would probably soon have destroyed them (similarly Taylor/Cartwright 2011, 319–320). Therefore, a tablet deposit in an infill under a higher floor provided good protection. The situation in Room 1, Layer II, as described above, can be regarded as exemplary. In the other rooms, no higher floor levels could be detected, but the archaeological remains were uncovered directly below the eroded modern surface, and the area was devastated by looting, destroying and removing later layers.

Concerning Umma in the Old Babylonian period, therefore, assemblages of cuneiform artefacts were formed by relocations of previously collected groups (in the same or another room). Very similar procedures in the formation of collections for short-term administrative tablets and bullae as well as for exercise tablets, have been identified in Umma. Regarding the bullae and the tablet collection from R.1, the preserved year dates indicate that the original deposits were built up over several years. If a building or room had been destroyed, and especially if it was burnt, assemblages of clay tablets are found more easily at their original place, reflecting their usage. However, no destruction layer was identified during the archaeological excavation at Umma.[19]

Although hundreds of Old Babylonian cuneiform artefacts were retrieved in the Šara Temple and the Administrative Complex, this represents only a tiny fraction of the tablets that were written and deposited there. It is hard to believe that the dossier concerning the barley receipts found in R.21 (Section 3.2, UmCT 2) was the only sector of the temple's administration that was subject to written documentation. Furthermore, the higher-level documents, accounts of the barley income and expenditure, are not known yet.

The disappearance of unbaked clay objects is a factor that is proven by the incomplete composition of the tablet assemblages found at Umma in a large-scale excavation. Whether unbaked tablets were recycled for their clay on a large scale and thus some collections survived only accidentally before they were used as an infill remains dubious (Faivre 1995): No basin for the making of tablets was found in the Old Babylonian buildings at Jokha. Also, elsewhere in Babylonia, the collection of tablets for recycling can rarely be proven (Taylor/Cartwright 2011).

18 This can be added to the examples Tell Beydar, the Dublamaḫ at Ur, House of Puzurum at Terqa, and Palais oriental at Mari, noted by Faivre (1995, 63–64) regarding the deposition of tablets as filling material.

19 The articles presented under the tite 'les phénomènes de fin d'archives en Mésopotamie' (Joannès ed. 1995) deal often with cases of destruction and with residential buildings where tablets were handled differently (Sauvage 1995).

The assemblages of written artefacts from infills often reflect the antecedent practices of writing and deposition. Concerning the bullae from the Šara Temple and the Administrative Complex (Fig. 2, Section 3.2 and 3.3, UmCT 2 and 3), the chronological distribution indicates that the documents were not cleaned up after each review or annual account, but kept in the same deposit for some time, between five and eleven years, according to the evidence from the assemblages listed above.

The documentation of cuneiform artefacts from different rooms in Umma offers many opportunities to study cuneiform writing according to building, historical context, text type, and administrative practices. It is, for example, noteworthy that the two different organisations working in the Šara Temple and the Administrative Complex employed the same format of bullae for different procedures. The historical and prosopographic connections explain the similarities, and one may not have discovered the distinction between the two assemblages without the archaeological contexts.

4.2 Repatriating cuneiform artefacts from lootings

The review of cuneiform artefacts from soundings, lootings, and excavations, last but not least, leads to a final aspect, the factor of archaeological evidence in repatriating objects known through the antiquities market.

The large-scale excavations of the Iraqi team with their documentation, registration in the Iraq Museum, and the publication of reports in Sumer (Al-Mutawalli 2009, Al-Mutawalli/Al-Harbi 2011) provide the ideal basis for such a discussion. Because of the wide areas exposed in the centre of the ancient city, aspects of the distribution of tablets from lootings become meaningful. The Ur III administrative tablets, for example, cannot have been found in the large area covered by the buildings in Areas A to F, in the Šara Temple, and in the residential area of Tell 8.

On the other hand, the excavations allow an attribution of looted objects to their original contexts, as we have shown concerning the bullae from the Main Tell (UmCT 3, see Al-Mutawalli et al. 2024). This combination is well known from other sites, and the present volume provides more examples.

In the case of the Early Old Babylonian tablets, the finds from Umma corrected the wrong attribution of a set of tablets and bullae to Kisurra, but instead showed that they are from Umma (Al-Mutawalli et al. 2024, 5–11). In this way, a series of letters housed mostly in the British Museum and written by Aḫum, who is known as an Amorite chieftain and ruler of Umma, could be placed into their historical context. Building on the complete evidence, an in-depth study of Aḫum became possible (Sallaberger in print). Therefore, the value of publishing cuneiform artefacts from archaeological excavations may reach far beyond the objects actually presented.

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