

Cuneiform Artefacts from Iraq

Edited by
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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.

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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

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*, *RIA* 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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Introduction

1 Introducing the topic

The contributions gathered in this volume concentrate on one fundamental aspect where Cuneiform Philology and Ancient Near Eastern Archaeology meet, the archaeological context of cuneiform artefacts. Literally, 'archaeological' refers to the discipline and the method of excavation, but neither to the excavated architecture nor the identified layers. Since the objects found at a site and their assemblages are determined and labelled by archaeological methodology, we consider it appropriate to use the term 'archaeological context'. The term 'cuneiform artefact' covers both clay tablets as the standard writing medium and other inscribed objects, and is considered fitting for our project since it focuses on the material realisation of texts written in the Akkadian or Sumerian language in a specific historical situation. The primary focus on the cuneiform artefacts, as expressed in the title, indicates the philological background of the editors and the setting within the editorial project 'Cuneiform Artefacts from Iraq in Context' based at the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften and the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. In the project's title, however, the term 'context' refers to all kinds of contexts, and they are also defined in historical, social, religious, scholarly, or linguistic terms. By dealing with archaeological contexts, we focus explicitly on one specific, but in our view, central theme in the wide field of interdisciplinary research of Cuneiform Philology and Ancient Near Eastern Archaeology.

All contributions in this volume have derived from ongoing research projects dealing with sites in Iraq, in Babylonian and in Assyria, including both current archaeological work and the study of tablets from earlier excavations. Field research in Iraq has once again been possible for some ten to fifteen years now, after opportunities for exploration in the country had been limited or completely stopped for decades due to the unstable political situation. Whereas archaeological contexts of cuneiform artefacts have been intensively studied for sites in the modern states of Syria (e.g. Mari, Ebla, Ugarit, Nabada/Tell Beydar, Tell Brak, Tell Khuer, and many more) and Türkiye (e.g. Hattuşa, Kaniş/Kültepe, Alalah/Aççana Höyük, Sarissa/Kuşaklı, and others), similar studies are hardly available for the region of modern Iraq.

A representative selection of Iraqi sites features in this book, namely (from north to south) in Assyria Kemune/Zahiku (Ivana Puljiz and Betina Faist), Nineveh (Sophie Cohen), Kalah/Nimrud (Tonio Mitto), Assur (Peter A. Miglus), and in Babylonia Sippar Amnānum/Tell ed-Dēr (Anna Kolba), Babylon (Odette Boivin), Nippur (Susanne Paulus), Isin (Kai Kaniuth, Claus Wilcke), Umma (Nawala Al-Mutawalli and Walther Sallaberger), Ġirsu/Tello (Jon Taylor and Angelo Di Michele), Uruk (Margarete van Ess), and Ur (Dominique Charpin, Anna Pintér), thereby touching historical periods from Gudea of Lagaš to Parthian rule. The authors, both archaeologists and philologists, present results and discussions based on the documentation of past excavations (e. g. Nippur, Babylon or Ur), or the data of recent or ongoing excavations (especially Kemune and Uruk), and sometimes a combination of both, given the long history of research at some large sites (e. g. Ur, Umma, Nippur, Assur).

The authors provide in-depth case studies, and besides the specific topic, the following overarching themes are often addressed:

- 1) methodological issues, including the approach to philological data within an archaeological setting, strategies for excavation and documentation, or the reconstruction of textual dossiers;
- 2) terminology concerning coherent sets of cuneiform objects ('assemblage', 'dossier', 'archive', etc.);
- 3) material aspects of the production, use, and preservation of cuneiform artefacts.

Some themes from the various chapters will be summarised in the following sections of this Introduction.

The authors of this volume employ different methodological approaches, and in the preparation, the theoretical foundation laid out in the first chapter by Walther Sallaberger was not imposed on them. There, the definition of Cuneiform Philology is developed within the framework of the Theory of Practices, arguing that philology as a discipline 'to make sense of the texts' (Sheldon Pollock) necessarily integrates the study of writing, language, and the historical situation. In this perspective, avoiding a disciplinary distinction between deciphering and editing of texts and 'more advanced' interpretation, the archaeological context becomes a relevant topic for philologists—also amply demonstrated by the contributions in this volume. On the other hand, texts provide another aspect of meaning to the historical interpretation of the buildings where the written objects were found. Discussing the archaeological context of cuneiform artefacts goes beyond compiling lists of texts excavated in a room and a layer, but it engages with the practice of ancient people, including the scribes, who produced and wrote, used and discarded the artefacts.

2 Excavations and documentation

2.1 *A site as provenance*

A massive part of the known cuneiform corpus stems from undocumented 19th-century soundings in the search for tablets, and probably even a larger portion from illegal lootings. In such cases, the archaeological context is lost, but the study of notes by early explorers, acquisition catalogues of museums and the contents of the texts may often help to identify a site as the probable provenance of a written object. The standard practice (in text publications, data collections or museums) of naming a site as provenance for a written artefact is mandatory, and this minimal information already forms a sound basis for many investigations. In the large cities of Mesopotamia, clay tablets and inscriptions have been found in many different spots on a site, and the differentiation of findspots within the urban landscape is a primary task for research in such sites. This is exemplified in this volume by the studies related to Ur (Charpin, Pintér), Umma (Al-Mutawalli/Sallaberger), Isin (Wilcke, Kaniuth), Tell ed-Dēr (Kolba), Assur (Miglus), or Babylon (Boivin). In this regard, the relatively precise information on Assurbanipal's tablet collections from the site of Kuyunjik within Nineveh has to be underlined, where the discovery of orthostats with reliefs has provided a palatial context to the first excavators in the mid-19th century, a situation completely different from the vast structureless areas of ancient sites in the southern alluvium.

Even if no direct information on the findspots seems available, one may often identify the provenance more precisely beyond the pure name of a site. Contributions to this volume demonstrate that, in some cases, cuneiform tablets from lootings or undocumented

soundings can successfully be combined with dossiers of excavated tablets.¹ In this form, the unprovenanced tablets enrich the assemblage from a documented context, and the archaeological context adds information to the otherwise orphaned finds. The ‘repatriation’ of undocumented or looted finds to their original contexts is a most satisfying result of the research on textual dossiers (see 3.3 below). Examples in this volume include Early Old Babylonian Umma (Al-Mutawalli/Sallaberger), Ur (Charpin), Old Babylonian Tell ed-Dēr (Kolba), and Nippur, regarding Trench WB (Paulus); other sites could easily be added for this combination of looted and excavated tablets.

While studying cuneiform artefacts from legal excavations, one cannot ignore data from looting, especially regarding the massive looting in Iraq from the late 19th century to the early 1930s and from the 1990s to the 2000s. The soundings of the first explorers, driven by historical interest, and the archaeological excavations provoked lootings at the same sites; this is indicated for Umma (Al-Mutawalli/Sallaberger, p. 116), Isin (Kaniuth, p. 146f.), and Nippur (Paulus, p. 230), and more places (such as Ġirsu) may be added. The lootings undertaken by locals and the sale through antiquities dealers always violated existing laws; they were sanctioned with varying degrees of consistency. The retrieved written objects, however, are part of the historical legacy and have to be integrated into our research.

2.2 *Archaeological research strategies and documentation regarding cuneiform artefacts*

From an archaeological perspective, inscribed artefacts are not registered differently from other prominent artefacts, and therefore, the documentation of find contexts is directly related to the methodologies and strategies employed by an archaeological expedition.² The Assyriologist in the excavation may contribute by cleaning, photographing, drawing, identifying, or describing the written artefacts as objects, but he cannot be held responsible for the documentation of the findspots.³

1 Evidently, this is true of inscriptions as well. As long as no documented excavations had taken place in Jokha/Umma, Šu-Suen’s building inscriptions referred to the Šara temple somewhere in the city. After the temple’s excavation by N. Al-Mutawalli in 2000–2001, the looted inscribed door-sockets can be ascribed to a known building, albeit not to the exact door openings.

2 An explicit statement in this regard, and worth to be quoted in full, are the first phrases by McGuire Gibson in his ‘Nippur series editor’s preface’ *apud* Cole 1996, xii: ‘This volume, the first epigraphic study in the program of publication of the modern Nippur excavations, is being presented in the Oriental Institute Publications series rather than in the Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization or Assyriological Studies series in order to emphasize, in a concrete way, the necessity for treating epigraphic material as artifacts in a unitary archaeological record. Tablets are the most information-rich class of artifacts, but that information is very often not used to full advantage. Because of conventions in our field, data to be derived from epigraphic remains have not been communicated to the archaeologists in a timely fashion, if at all; conversely, valuable information on cultural significance that could be inferred from a group of artifacts found in association with inscriptions has not been made available or has not been made relevant to the epigrapher. It has been my purpose, for more than twenty years, to reduce the gap between the epigrapher and the archaeologist. To begin this process, in the 12th season at Nippur we decided to cease the practice of keeping a separate catalog for texts and to include them in the regular object catalog, this forcing the archaeologist and epigrapher to talk to one another on a more regular basis.’ The often-used term ‘epigraphist’ should be avoided for cuneiform philologists since it derives from the distinction between epigraphy (dealing with inscriptions) and papyrology in Classics.

3 This also becomes evident in this volume by comparing the different documentation standards of Koldey and Andrae with those of Woolley, two expeditions without a constant Assyriological presence.

By marking the beginning of scientific excavations in Iraq with Robert Koldewey's expedition to Babylon, 1899–1917 (Boivin, p. 281), today more studies of archaeological contexts have to deal with the publications and archives compiled by excavators and their successors over more than a century, than with current excavations. The digitisation of archaeological documentation, including catalogues, field notes, journals, drawings, letters, unpublished reports, etc., has helped to overcome the restricted information selected for publications. This is well demonstrated by the chapters concerning Ur (Charpin, Pintér), Isin (Kaniuth), Nippur (Paulus), or Babylon (Boivin).

The contributions in this volume have amply documented that there is no simple way to differentiate the quality of excavation records only by date, as far as they concern our topic, the archaeological context of written artefacts. During the same decades, quite different standards were employed by excavation teams: Koldewey's Babylon excavation, for example, overlapped with the last years of the Nippur expedition with almost no documentation; and Woolley excavated after Koldewey and Andrae at Assur, but with much lower standards of documentation. Koldewey can be seen as a turning point in the history of archaeological documentation in Mesopotamia, and Boivin (p. 281) points to 'Koldewey's own meticulousness' as the driving factor at a time when the study of textual archives in their archaeological context did not play a role yet.

The situation at Ur is much more complicated, and much time and energy have been invested to arrive at a better understanding of the findspots, especially for the Ur III tablets from Woolley's excavations (Pintér, this volume). However, reconstructing dossiers of related documents (see Section 3.3) leads to an improved comprehension of the corpus and to historical results, even if not every tablet can be attributed to a findspot. Similarly, other contributions (Charpin, Kolba, Paulus, Boivin) address the sophisticated ways to assign tablets to their original findspots by scrutinising the available documentation, creating dossiers based on prosopography, date, text type, etc. and by adducing the acquisition dates and numbers of a museum to identify tablets from the same shipment.

Various contributors to this volume have made the important point to consider not only the different methodologies available, but also the strategies that guided an archaeological expedition. As Paulus has phrased it: 'Decisions about where, what, and how to excavate and document, what to take and what to leave behind, profoundly influence our knowledge and research today' (p. 213). Thus, although basically interested in historical explorations, Peters and Haynes were pressed by their Philadelphia financiers to search for cuneiform tablets (Paulus, p. 214f.). On the other side, Koldewey did not 'hunt' written documents; he was primarily interested in the architecture and the development of the city over time. Boivin then asks 'what was recorded and what wasn't' (p. 280), and she compares the excavation strategies of Koldewey and Reuther. From the perspective of Pintér (p. 80), Woolley tried to construct a narrative that made sense of the new world that he discovered. He provided vivid images of the excavated sites, whereas detailed documentation, especially of written artefacts, was often lacking.

Kaniuth makes clear that a methodologically most up-to-date expedition of its time, the Munich expedition to Isin led by B. Hrouda in 1973–1989, divided the research on architecture and finds between various specialists without integrating the results into an overarching historical reconstruction, thereby losing much information despite meticulous documentation (p. 151). Whereas philologists are often satisfied with the indication of the findspot in a building, Miglus points out that for the private houses of Assur and the exact information provided by Andrae, a careful reading of plans and stratigraphy and renewed excavations may change previous assumptions, and that archaeological observation of contexts has to go beyond the association of tablets with architectural features (p. 276). In a similar way, Kaniuth proposes a development from contexts related to architecture (in the

tradition from Koldewey to Hrouda) to single-context-recording and the observation of later disturbances, and he suggests that all data should be subject to the same recording standards and that ‘specialist research results feed back into an overarching research strategy’ (p. 157). This volume’s examples from ongoing excavations at Ġirsu (Taylor/Di Michele), Ur (Charpin), Kemune (Puljiz/Faist), and Uruk (van Ess) indicate how much both archaeology and philology profit from careful observation and documentation in the field.

Thus, research on the objects and their contexts cannot be separated from their documentation. To cite again from Paulus’ contribution: ‘The evidence discussed here underscores once more the basic but often uncomfortable point that our histories of Kassite Nippur are not only shaped by the textual and archaeological sources in their contexts, but also by excavation priorities, documentation practices, and later editorial choices’ (p. 231).

2.3 *Mobility of texts and artefacts*

Based on the information regarding provenance and archaeological contexts, the mobility of people, artefacts and texts may be discovered.

‘Assurbanipal’s Library’ in Nineveh was found early in the history of explorations in Mesopotamia, and after the discovery of more tablet collections, one may even more appreciate its exceptional size and quality. Although the methods to record find contexts had not yet been developed, the attribution of tablets to specific expeditions and the museum numbers allow a basic reconstruction of architectural contexts beyond the general provenance label ‘Kuyunjik’ (Reade 1986). The paratextual information of colophons, as presented by Cohen (this volume) has become a central means to reconstruct the collection’s compilation and histories of tablets and preceding collections. Cohen elaborates on the movement of scholars and their tablets from Ġarrān’s Sīn temple to the royal court of Nineveh. The mobility of scholars and artefacts is a large topic which has been intensively studied (e.g. Robson/Stevens 2019).

The library in the Nabû temple of Nimrud is well documented by Mallowan, and this indicates that the collection integrates earlier libraries. Mitto’s identification of a hyper-archaic text as representing a royal inscription of Šamši-Adad V cannot simply be combined with a stele of the same king in the same building, and a hyper-archaic lexical list, but the chronology asks for a more nuanced explanation. As Mitto phrases it: ‘With the close ties that the scholarly elite of Kalḫu maintained with the Assyrian royal court, it is likely that many of the scholarly tablets moved between cities much like their owners’ (p. 239). Or, seen from the perspective of the objects: ‘The tablets found in the Kalhu Ezida do not constitute its “library” in a fixed sense, but rather represent the remains of whichever scholarly works happened to be in situ when the building was destroyed’, a ‘distributed library’ (Robson/Stevens 2019, 339).

While the mobility of literary and scholarly texts can be traced through colophons, the movement of archival documents can be detected only occasionally, primarily through well-documented archaeological excavations. The mobility of administrative documents reveals connections between individuals and residences that would not be apparent from the texts themselves.

An example of how mobility is revealed by known findspots is given by Charpin: a sealing from Eanantuma, Isin’s *en*-priestess at Ur, was found in the house of the grand vizier Etellum at Larsa (p. 108f.), illustrating an aspect of the diplomatic relationship maintained by the priestess with the new political leadership. In Old Babylonian Sippar-Amnānum, the thematic and prosopographic coherence suggests a possible division of a single dossier between two houses, as argued by Kolba (p. 169–171)

The mobility of texts and its diachronic aspects become particularly relevant in the first millennium. Written artefacts used in one city may be used in later contexts as well. This is impressively documented by van Ess in her essay on the Seleucid temple in Uruk, F/G 29, where bricks inscribed by rulers from Šîn-kāšid to Cyrus the Great were discovered (p. 298).

2.4 Post-depositional processes related to cuneiform artefacts

Before the deposition of cuneiform artefacts is discussed in the next section, from a 'living archive' and a library to secondary contexts of discarded tablets, a short note should be added on the conditions under which cuneiform tablets are preserved. Although clay tablets are an extremely durable writing medium, unbaked tablets crumble easily and are dissolved in water. Therefore, the discovery of cuneiform artefacts also depends on favourable conditions, both of the soil, ideally a loose material so that the water can drain away properly, and the protection from above, ideally a second floor to protect the filling of discarded tablets and a roof, or remains of the fallen walls. When tablets are found along the walls of a room, one may ask whether they had been placed there or whether those in the centre were destroyed by people and animals walking through or by rainfall. The post-depositional protection of clay tablets used as a filling in a secondary context might occasionally be better than in the original position in a room (see the examples from Umma provided by Al-Mutawalli/Sallaberger, p. 128f.). Beyond natural factors, ancient destructions, lootings, or earlier soundings may have reduced the number of written artefacts in an archaeological context (see Paulus on Nippur, Trench WB, p. 230, or Mitto on Kalḫu p. 238, besides Umma).

The case is different for baked written artefacts, as evidenced by well-known examples such as the collections of Ebla, Hattusa or Nineveh. Single baked objects can be found dispersed over larger areas, and therefore, one is faced with the high number of Gudea nails found at Ġirsu (Taylor/Di Michele), the Ur III tablets discovered as stray finds in the Ġanunmaḫ of Ur (Pintér) or in later contexts in Umma (Al-Mutawalli/Sallaberger), or the inscribed bricks collected on the surface in Isin (Kaniuth).

3 Findspots and assemblages of cuneiform artefacts

3.1 Terminology: Assemblage, dossier, collection, archive, library

Clay tablets and bullae with cuneiform writing are often found in clusters in excavations, and in other cases, groups can be defined by their shared historical context and social setting. Assyriologists usually speak of 'archives' or, in the case of scholarly tablets, 'libraries' (Veenhof 1986; Pedersén 1985; 1986; 1998). In Assyriology, a group of archival tablets (administrative and legal documents, letters) from the same historical and social context, whether found in one findspot or reconstructed from collections, is usually called an 'archive':

'Archive' in the most general sense of the word refers to tablets which were found (and therefore normally also kept) physically together as a group and which belonged to an individual, a family or an institutional household. Since only a small minority of Neo-Babylonian texts come from properly documented archaeological contexts, such archives have normally to be reconstructed. (Jursa 2005, 57)

I use the term ‘archive’ to designate a collection of cuneiform tablets and/or seal impressions that were received or produced by an administrative body, its officials, or an individual acting in private capacity, insofar as those tablets or seal impressions were intended to remain in the custody of that body, official, or person. (Lauinger 2011, 23)

[A]n *archive* means a collection of documents which once belonged to a person. The person controlled the archive. (Arkhipov 2019, 35)

Often, there is further division between so-called ‘living’ and ‘dead’ archives (based on Veenhof 1986, 6; see also Jursa 2005, 58):

For the relation between ancient archives and their find spots, the notions of living archives and dead archives are helpful. A *living archive* is a storage of texts that were preserved for their documentary value till the end of the building’s lifetime. That is, a living archive is a genuine ancient archive found *in situ*. An archive does not necessarily correspond to an archive room. [...]

A *dead archive* consists of texts that were thrown away or put to a secondary use in antiquity. Most frequently, clay tablets were used as construction or filling material. In such cases, texts from several former archives were often mixed together. A room where dead archives were found need not be an archive room. (Arkhipov 2019, 35–36)

The label ‘dead archive’ in Arkhipov’s (2019, 36) definition considers both archaeological context and the social site; the case of reconstructed archives is not considered there. Pedersén (1985; 1986; 1998), on the other hand, starts from an excavated building or room, and then labels the tablets found in one place, depending on their text type, as ‘archives’ or ‘libraries’:

Each group of interrelated texts is here classified either as a library or an archive. ‘Library’ describes a group of literary texts in the widest sense of the word, including for example lexical texts. ‘Archive’ describes a group of administrative, economic, juridical and similar types, including letters. The occurrence of a few texts of the opposite type has not led to a classification change from library to archive and vice versa. (Pedersén 1985, 20)

Evidently, the concepts for an archive in Assyriology cover largely overlapping but slightly different categories, combining tablets based either on their social context of production and deposition, or on their findspot (which may often identify the social site as well). The wide Assyriological usage of the term ‘archive’ has influenced terminology in other instances. All everyday texts, administrative and legal documents, as well as letters, are often labelled ‘archival texts’. Furthermore, the ‘archival approach’ in the study of documents has become standard practice, considering groups of cuneiform documents together in any interpretation (Hilgert 1998, 4–6).

As repeatedly discussed in the scholarly literature (see below) and in some contributions to this volume (especially by Pintér, Charpin, Al-Mutawalli/Sallaberger, and Miglus), one may differentiate various ways in which groups of tablets are constituted. The main categories can be summarised as follows:

- An assemblage is a group of tablets defined by archaeological context.
- A dossier is defined by criteria of historical context and social setting and does not depend on a documented archaeological context.

- A collection implies the presence of a ‘collector’, thus may be used for a coherent group of tablets.
- An archive represents a room to store cuneiform documents to keep them available.
- A library corresponds to an archive, but comprises tablets with scholarly (literary, lexical, technical) texts.

Especially relevant for the discussions in this volume are the concepts of assemblage and dossier, and their relation to the wide Assyriological usage of the term ‘archive’. Terminology is not fully consistent across the contributions in this volume, but the variations should not hinder their appreciation.

3.2 Assemblages defined by archaeology

The archaeological term ‘assemblage’ defines cuneiform artefacts from one context defined by architecture and stratigraphy, and accounting for processes of fragmentation and accumulation. Many articles in this book, for example, those by Pintér, Charpin, Wilcke, Kaniuth, Kolba, Paulus, Mitto, and Boivin, deal essentially with assemblages of tablets found in one context, although the authors often speak of ‘archives’. The term ‘assemblage’ is, however, only rarely used explicitly (by Al-Mutawalli/Sallaberger and Miglus).

Archaeologically defined assemblages probably cover most occurrences of ‘dead archives’ according to the understanding cited above. Miglus, in his paper, demonstrates for the House of the Singers at Assur that a re-interpretation of archaeological contexts, especially the stratigraphy, implies a redefinition of the assemblages of clay tablets (p. 272). The meticulous documentation of Andrae in Assur allowed Pedersén (1985; 1986) to attribute tablets to certain rooms and houses, and this is often possible for Koldewey’s finds at Babylon, whose expedition developed methods for the precise recording, including absolute height, which points to the underlying stratigraphy (Boivin, this volume).

Assemblages may contain cuneiform artefacts where they had been deposited during their period of use (as in the house of Šîn-nādā in Ur, see Charpin, p. 107f.), but more often, tablet assemblages consist of discarded tablets, especially when used as fillings or building material. These archaeologically defined assemblages may include tablets from the same primary deposit, e.g., a series of administrative texts or documents and letters from a family archive. Therefore, in the historical reconstruction, assemblages both permit and demand an archival approach. On the other hand, the deposition of tablets as filling material does not imply that a complete set of tablets was removed from its deposit and carefully buried; losses in the files are inevitable. This fundamentally distinguishes assemblages from archives stored in clay vessels (as in Middle Assyrian Kemune, Puljiz/Faist, p. 201) or kept in an archive room (e. g. in the palace of Ebla).

Various case studies for discarded tablets are gathered in this volume. Especially instructive is the discussion of Old Babylonian Isin, for which Kaniuth states that ‘up to 90% of the texts were found in secondary or tertiary position, usually deposited as filling material’ (p. 153). Wilcke, in his contribution, does not contradict this evaluation and adds the episode that discarded clay tablets also ended up in bricks (p. 136). On the other hand, the philologist Wilcke discovers that many tablets from the same area are related to the same person, thus presenting remains of a coherent dossier, as one would name it (see below). The articles by Kaniuth and Wilcke indicate that the ‘secondary context’ does not limit the advantages of an archival approach, but the correlation between building and tablets might become more complex.

The often-used term ‘secondary context’ implies that there existed a primary context, the place where tablets were written, used, and collected for documentation or consultation; in these cases, cuneiform artefacts served as media for texts. When in the course of some building operations or refurbishments, a floor level was raised, a bench installed, a wall built, a pit filled, one used clay material, and this clay material may have included discarded tablets. For the builders, the tablets were used as lumps of clay and constituted their primary construction material. This is the prototypical background for tablets found in ‘secondary context’, which may mostly be close in time and place to their usage.

The secondary context was not recognised by the excavator Woolley (1925, 392), when he attributed the largest accumulation of Ur III tablets found in Ur to a ‘Registrar’s Office’ in the ‘Edublamah’ excavation area, whereas in fact, it represents filling material from a later period (Pintér, p. 79).

The intervals of cleaning a tablet deposit or an archive is reflected when cuneiform documents from a coherent dossier and dated over several years are found together in a secondary deposit. Pintér pointed to this life-cycle of tablet collections in Ur III Ur, and the relation between the text groups pertaining to textile production found in sites SM and the Edublamah indicates the timing of document disposal, probably corresponding to a change of officials (p. 93f.). In Umma’s Administrative Complex, dating to the Early Old Babylonian period, various assemblages of bullae stemming from the same institutional context indicate archival cleanings after some five to eleven years (Al-Mutawalli/Sallaberger, p. 131f.). These processes of cleaning out tablet deposits are a well-known fact, and we refer only to another example from the Old Babylonian archive of Iltani in Tell ar-Rimāḥ:

The administrative texts found with Iltani’s letters then were probably those from the most recent, or current year, [...] while a few selected earlier texts were kept for reasons that are not immediately apparent to us. As letters and administrative texts—as at Shemshara—seem to have been mixed indiscriminately, we probably have to assume that a secretary or the like at regular intervals went through the archive and discarded old and/or unimportant administrative texts. (Eidem 1989, 72)

Cuneiform artefacts are not only found in clusters, but as single objects in various contexts. They may be left-overs of cleared-out rooms, or otherwise have ended in different places. Nevertheless, most stray finds may originally have been deposited close to their place of discovery, and they often offer clues on the historical context. In the case of Ur, Pintér has shown that the Ur III tablets from the ‘Enunmah’ building cannot present remains of a coherent collection (p. 89). In Early Old Babylonian layers at Umma, Sargonic and Ur III tablets are certainly intrusive as well (Al-Mutawalli/Sallaberger, p. 125f.). In the Mittani palace of Kemune/Zaḥiku, ten tablets were recovered in a secondary context, not representing a coherent archive; they nevertheless have to be seen as remains deposited in the Mittani palace and related to its history (Puljiz/Faist, p. 196). Whereas single stray finds or tablets from an earlier period can easily be identified, it is sometimes more challenging or perhaps even impossible to separate the different primary collections from which tablets have ended up in fillings.

The archaeological term ‘assemblage’ for tablets found in a similar context has already frequently been used in Assyriology. For example, Robson (2013, 48) speaks of an ‘assemblage of scholarly tablets’, and also Delnero (2019, 173) discusses ‘assemblages of literary compositions’ when talking about Nippur House F or Ur Broad Street no. 1, and adds that ‘it would be inaccurate to refer to these textual assemblages as archives or libraries in the strict sense of either term.’ Nevertheless, the archaeological context always demands that the tablets from one assemblage have to be considered together, be they scholarly or archival texts.

3.3 *Dossiers defined by philology*

Coherent sets of cuneiform artefacts, as defined by their historical and social context or in other words, the person who had collected and controlled the set of documents, have often been called ‘dossiers’ in Assyriological research. The methodology to reconstruct dossiers by date, topic, prosopography, diplomatics, provenance, and text type as outlined by Charpin (this volume; see also Charpin 2010; 2017; 2018) is predicted by the praxeological definition of cuneiform artefacts (Sallaberger, this volume). Much research has been dedicated to reconstructing dossiers, not only those from archaeological excavations, but especially concerning tablets deprived of an archaeological context, since the early days of Assyriology.

Paulus (this volume) uses the term ‘dossier’ (referring to Charpin 2014, 34–35) when referring to the large series of documents from Kassite Nippur as ‘Grain dossier’, which was previously termed „Archiv des Speichers“ by Sassmannshausen (p. 215f.). The dossier is reconstructed which implies that only tablets with clear criteria can be included.

The coherence of tablets in a dossier does not necessarily indicate that they were found in one place, thus in one archive room. An example studied in this volume by Kolba is Old Babylonian Tell ed-Dēr, with a dossier of family documents and administrative notes possibly distributed over two different buildings, with one major findspot. In Early Old Babylonian Umma, the dossier of bullae concerning the administration of small flocks was found in three different findspots, of which one is surely a secondary context in a fill (Al-Mutawalli/Sallaberger, p. 127f.).

Archaeological context helps to define dossiers since they may derive from one room or building, or adjacent structures. Starting from the observation that thousands of Ur III tablets from Ur were found in fillings, Pintér disentangles various dossiers by topic, date, officials, and includes the findspot as another tool to reconstruct archival relations. Due to the inconsistent information on findspots in Ur, research starting from assemblages has not been possible.

Kolba (this volume) discusses the administrative building in Old Babylonian Tell ed-Dēr, Area 2, and differentiates five groups of tablets found there with an internal coherence in terms of topics and prosopography, but only to some extent, archaeological context, and thus she labels them ‘dossiers’: the formation of groups is mainly based on the philological analysis (p. 161f.). Beyond the tablets excavated by the Iraqi archaeologists under Taha Baqir, she can also adduce texts from earlier soundings in Tell ed-Dēr stored in the British Museum, and thus reconstructs archival connections.

Wilcke (this volume) applies a similar methodology when studying tablets from Nordabschnitt II at Isin found in fillings and in bricks, but stemming from Babylon’s governor at Isin under Samsuiluna and representing remains of his original tablet collection.

In the case of tablets from archaeological contexts, the differentiation between assemblage and dossier is essential to deal, on the one hand, with the possible mixture of tablets from different sources or post-depositional disturbances, and on the other hand, with the common source of tablets from one primary context. Selecting tablets for a dossier is based on the understanding of the group of tablets (Baker 2004, 5 on the choices made in reconstructing an ‘archive’). This can be balanced by the study of the complete archaeological assemblage. Lauinger (2011) describes his approach to tablets from Alalah:

A common thread in these archival approaches to the Alalah tablets has been to look for, or reconstruct, “dossiers,” that is, groups of tablets that relate to a particular task, on the basis of perceived similarities in content. This situation is less than desirable, as any such reconstructions necessarily risk affirming our own preconceptions. As an alternative, in this article, I explore the extent to which the sequence of excavation

numbers with which tablets were registered can provide an indirect means of determining tablets that were found in spatial proximity and thus might form excavated and not reconstructed dossiers. (...) Then I show that in at least one instance an excavated, and not reconstructed, dossier of cuneiform tablets can be discerned in this manner. This excavated dossier comprises four cuneiform tablets that were actually stored together in antiquity as a meaningful file. (Lauinger 2011, 22)

The paratextual information of colophons might be another means to define dossiers of tablets from a scribe or Assurbanipal's palace, but as already noted above (Section 2.3), these dossiers are not necessarily bound to one city (Cohen, this volume). One might call these 'scholarly dossiers' to differentiate them from the 'archival dossiers' consisting of administrative and legal documents and letters.

3.4 Archives, libraries, collections defined by archaeology and philology

The term 'archive' is used in Assyriology as a basically social concept, identifying persons and their tablets, with a find-spot in a house, and the owner of the house controlling the tablets in his archive (see the definitions above Section 3.1). The same concept of an archive has been transferred to administrative buildings and palaces, inducing a lengthy discussion of 'private' and 'official' or 'state' archives (e. g. Pedersén 1985, 21; Veenhof 1986, 9; Jaquet 2013, 69; Kolba, this volume). This understanding of an archive may in some, but not in all cases agree 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)

Other definitions of archives exist, and Faraguna (2013, 8) proposes that archives are 'conceived as collections of documents deliberately made for public or private purposes in antiquity.' In this case, an archive is not necessarily restricted to 'the physical spaces, the repositories where records are kept, but they are also the organised active "memory" of the society producing them' (Faraguna 2013, 8).

The preceding paragraphs have discussed archaeologically defined assemblages and philologically reconstructed dossiers. Can one thus define as an archive the instances where both criteria coincide? The examples adduced for dossiers found in fillings or dispersed over various findspots demand more attention. The archaeological context, therefore, has to be evaluated also in an archaeological perspective (as exemplified by the contributions of Puljiz/Faist, Miglus or Boivin in this volume). Often, assemblages of tablets from a secondary context can be shown to stem from one common place, an archive, with records collected over some years. As already outlined in Section 3.1, collections found in a secondary context are labelled 'dead archives' in Assyriology.

On the other hand, tablets from a primary context of use, a storage of cuneiform artefacts pertaining to personal or institutional affairs, which, according to standard definitions, may be called an archive, a 'living archive' in Assyriological terminology, may also include tablets that would not at first sight have been included in a dossier (excluding, of course, stray finds from other historical contexts). One example suffices to illustrate this point:

[T]he few archaeologically reconstructed archives clearly show, however, that documents from various people could be stored together. Often there is some type of

relationship between the different principal actors that is not expressed in the texts, or tablets were transferred from the archive of one person to that of another together with the property they document. All archival reconstructions based on internal evidence are thus highly tentative. (Van De Mieroop 1992, 3)

Archaeological contexts of cuneiform artefacts have been studied for the papers in this volume from various ongoing research projects, and this has demonstrated that secondary contexts and, consequently, fragmentary remains from primary archives, are a widespread phenomenon. However, there exist cases of archives in the general meaning, collections of cuneiform artefacts in their primary storage context. The assemblages of tablets in houses in Ur (Charpin), Assur (Miglus), or Babylon (Boivin) represent the type of personal archives related to the owner of a house.

The study of Kassite tablets found at Nippur (Area WB) allowed Paulus to ‘confirm what Haynes and others have fabricated: a palace-like structure on the West Mounds with remnants of an archive still *in situ*’ (p. 230). The new Middle Assyrian archive found at Kemune/Zahiku consisted of five pottery jars found in House VII, with records related to Urad-ilāni, son of Adad-nādin-aḥḥē, and his office (Puljiz/Faist, p. 202). This represents an ideal case since the preservation in containers, sealed by the destruction of the building, allows the researcher to follow precisely the processes of selection and disposal of the archive owner (even if some tablets had been destroyed when the building collapsed).

The term ‘archive’ has another notion in Assyriology, since it is confronted with the term ‘library’ as a collection of tablets with scholarly texts (see above Section 3.1). The term ‘collection’ implies the presence of an agent who collected, perhaps also wrote, the tablets over a period of time. Hilgert (2013) or Cancik/Kahl (2018, 106) have argued to use this term ‘manuscript collection’ instead of the misleading Assyriological term ‘library’ (see also Robson 2013, 56). Even the distinction between scholarly and archival collections is not as clear-cut as the terminology implies, since tablets of both kinds were found in the same place (see, e.g., Pedersén 1998, 183-191; Robson/Stevens 2019, 328). This is even the rule in third millennium tablet collections, where tablets with lexical and literary texts are usually found in the same rooms as archival tablets (e.g. Archive L.2679 in the Palace G of Ebla; various findspots in Fara; see Zand 2019). Two contributions in this volume investigate how the collection to form a ‘library’ was executed, namely by following the people named in the colophons in the case of Nineveh (Cohen) and for Nimrud by combining colophons, historical dates and find contexts (Mitto).

4 Studies on materiality and history

In their papers for this book, the authors provided many more data, thoughts and conclusions than their arguments on archaeological contexts, questions of documentation and excavation strategies, and the definition of archives, dossiers, and assemblages, that have been shortly summarised in the preceding two sections. The contributions deal with a wide range of topics, and the selection presented in the following two summaries should be seen as another invitation to the reader to discover more of the fascinating and varied studies.

4.1 Production and use of inscribed objects

The archaeological context, when properly excavated, documented and analysed (see Section 2 above), requires an analysis of an accumulation of written documents found there

(see the preceding Section 3). Often, as we have seen, tablets and bullae were found in a secondary context as filling material between floors, in pits, or built into benches, bricks, or walls. A primary context, on the other hand, can be defined as the places where cuneiform artefacts were produced and written, read, and deposited. Collections of tablets and bullae may have been transported from one room to another, from one city to another, but their findspot remains always primary as long as they were treated as written records. This is, for example, the case with the many tablets that ended in Assurbanipal's library, even if they were written in other cities (Cohen, this volume). In short, the findspot of tablets, even from a primary context, does not directly indicate the place where the tablets were written or read. It remains, therefore, within the expectations that the contributions collected here do not discuss amply the places of writing, light conditions and the availability of clay. But Mitto (this volume) is asking how the writing of a hyper-archaic royal text may be related to a lexical list and a stela concerning the same king Šamši-Adad V and found in the same Nabû temple of Kalah. The lexical list did not provide the signs used in the tablet, and the inscription of the stela was not visible. Therefore, although the three texts ended up in the same findspot, they reflect the internal discourses on archaic signs and royal inscriptions, but do not simply represent the models and the new product.

A completely different form of 'secondary context' is provided by the example of the Seleucid temple in Uruk, F/G 29 (van Ess, this volume). The inscribed bricks used to erect the building were written in the names of Old Babylonian, Kassite, Late Babylonian and Achaemenid kings and could have been picked up in the city of Uruk. In the late temple, whose builder did not feel obliged to leave inscriptions, the inherited inscriptions were displayed, but apparently without any direct reference to the building.

How monumental inscriptions were produced and deposited is investigated by Taylor and Di Michele (this volume) with regard to the written (and not stamped) text with the highest number of duplicates, the nails (or cones) of Gudea for the erection of Ningirsu's Eninnu temple. Based on observations during the excavation, the paper investigates not only the 706 nails from the British Museum excavations at Tello but also includes hundreds of objects from museum collections. Taylor and Di Michele develop perspectives on how to investigate the cuneiform artefacts as material objects by dealing with their clay material, their form, the layout, the palaeography, and the placement, thus studying the practices related to the written artefact. They conclude that 'within the broad overall consistency, the inscribed nails of Eninnu reveal a high degree of variation in scribal practice. This applies to basic elements of document formatting, orthographic habits, and palaeographic habits' (p. 72). However, forming the objects and writing the text was separated from the deposition since no patterns of production could be detected with the *in situ* nails.

4.2 *From buildings and cities to political history*

This volume assembles various studies on Mesopotamian history from Gudea to the Seleucid period, thereby concentrating on specific buildings and some cities, as can be expected from the focus on archaeological contexts of cuneiform artefacts.

Among the discussions of various types of buildings, two articles deal with administrative centres in Old Babylonian cities, which are neither domestic houses nor palaces. Most administrative documents of the Early Old Babylonian period from Umma were found in an administrative complex without domestic features (Al-Mutawalli/Sallaberger, p. 121). In a comparable way, Kolba stated for the building in Area 2 in Tell ed-Dēr: 'The non-domestic, administrative character of the excavated building, together with the large number of administrative documents, indicates that the organisation was dealing with a wide scope of

goods in larger quantities' (p. 164). Furthermore, Kolba demonstrated that the building's official character remained over centuries, from the Early Old Babylonian 'TIM 7 organisation' of the early 19th century BCE, and the group of tablets from the time of Samsuiluna to the Late Old Babylonia documentation under Abiešuḫ.

Another rediscovered official building is the Kassite palace in Nippur, Area WB, and the important observation that this complex housed the central records on the taxation and distribution of the harvested field products, the so-called *tēlītu* texts (Paulus, p. 230). Puljiz and Faist present a recently discovered political centre, the Mittani palace and the MA governor's residence in Kemune/Zaḫiku.

The category of royal palaces is represented by Assurbanipal's library in Nineveh (Cohen), and that of temples by Gudea's Eninnu in Ġirsu and its building inscriptions (Taylor/Di Michele), the Nabû temple in Kalḫu with its library (Mitto), and the Seleucid temple in Uruk, F/G 29, with its reuse of old inscriptions, a warning that building inscriptions may not belong to the building in which they were discovered (van Ess).

More contributions deal with domestic houses. At the new excavations at Ur since 2015, the archaeological context has contributed significantly to the interpretation of documents, as outlined by Charpin (this volume). For example, records of fish deliveries discovered in the house of the general Abisum at Ur suggest his role as a leader of fishermen-soldiers, or the identification of the ruler mentioned in a 'king's meal' text makes it possible to determine the king of Babylon—information that would without context be absent from the document itself.

The last years of another Old Babylonian city are investigated by Wilcke in his evaluation of the house of Babylon's governor at Isin during the reign of Samsuiluna, with documented periods of presence and otherwise striking gaps indicating absence of Babylon's authority during these problematic years.

For Neo-Assyrian Assur, Miglus demonstrates that there were two different libraries in the House of the Singers at Assur, and he discusses the presence of Egyptians. Finally, first-millennium Babylon and its domestic houses with their collections of written artefacts are in the focus of Boivin's contribution.

The study of contexts, furthermore, leads to research on the cities. Al-Mutawalli/Sallaberger discuss the problem that Umma was known a city of Sargonic and especially Ur III occupation from looted tablets, whereas the Iraqi excavations have mainly unearthed Early and Middle Old Babylonian data, the period when Umma saw its largest extension according to archaeological survey data. The combination of provenances and excavated tablets, including the information from the large collection of looted tablets, allows first glimpses into the city's history. Isin is a city which has seen intensive archaeological work, and still, as Kaniuth points out, there is much to discover regarding the layout of the city in the second millennium. Kaniuth also integrates information from the looted tablets in his research and combines this with the results from recent surveys, including the distribution of royal inscriptions over the site. Miglus's careful study of the archaeological context of a single house in Assur affects significantly the calculation of the city's size.

The most comprehensive historical contribution in this volume is the study by Puljiz and Faist on the regime change from Mittani to Middle Assyrian rule, prompted by the unique situation at Kemune/Zaḫiku in the Middle Tigris region, north of Mosul. There, a Middle Assyrian governor placed his residence directly in the late Mittani palace during the time of Adad-nērārī I, a king famous for his campaigns against Mittani. The tablets were not discarded and were found in their original institutional context. This represents a particularly fortunate circumstance, as an earthquake followed by the abandonment of the building effectively 'fossilised' the archive, preserving it *in situ*. The dated tablets and precise observations indicate that only a short period of time had elapsed between the end of Mittani's rule

and the first Middle Assyrian presence. This prompts Puljiz and Faist to review the Mittani to Middle Assyrian transition in the larger area, from the lower and upper Habur region to the stretch of the Middle Tigris, thereby carefully noting all material and written remains that fall into the same period. The results already highlight periods of high activity in the 14th and 13th centuries BCE.

This introduction provided a brief overview of some of the general themes and specific aspects addressed in the following chapters. However, this does not adequately reflect the relevance and depth of the individual articles, and readers are therefore encouraged to explore the content of these chapters in greater detail.

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