Plate VI

(*Above*) Removing tablets from the field.
(*Below*) Inscribed brick and tablets from Akkadian period in situ.

WRITING AND HISTORY: THE NEW TABLETS FROM NIPPUR

All objects recovered by the archaeologist make a twofold contribution to the general information about the site under excavation. On the one hand, the manufacture and use of certain implements tell us something of the material culture and habits of the people who made and used them. Furthermore, where an object is discovered in a datable stratigraphic context, additional information is gleaned concerning the stage of cultural development which the local group of people had reached relative to their neighbors both in space and time. It is the interpretation of such evidence which permits the historian to reconstruct a section of human civilization at a specific point which may later be fixed in its proper place in the larger picture of man's history. Written records, moreover, can by their very nature make a unique and vital contribution to this picture.

When a medium was developed for the recording and transmission of human ideas and this medium became intelligible to men of later ages, insight was provided into the heart and soul of men and nations of bygone ages which resulted in a knowledge and appreciation of human history no physical data could possibly yield. Even the prosaic business record and school document make some contribution, but historic annals, private letters and religious literature add a wealth of information which cannot be over-emphasized. Not only are isolated events brought into sharp focus by the facts written documents provide, but where chronological data are likewise provided these events may be ordered in a consecutive chain of history in the full sense of the word.

The first inscribed tablets in Mesopotamia appear toward the close of the fourth millennium B.C. at the site of ancient Uruk (Erech) about 100 miles north of the Persian Gulf. In its earliest form the script was pictographic and probably included around 2000 different characters depicting various animals, plants, implements and parts thereof. In the course of time, the individual pictograms were stylized and simplified and their

number reduced as several similar pictures coalesced into one sign until by 2000 B.C. only about 350 were in common use. By this time the individual signs were no longer made by scratching pictures on soft clay but by producing a group of wedge-shaped impressions with a reed stylus. The Latin name for the triangular wedge gave its name to the script which was called *cuneiform*. The three major languages of ancient Mesopotamia were written in this script as modified for the needs of each one.

From the very beginning the cuneiform script was employed to record everyday business transactions such as sales and gifts of livestock, agricultural products etc., as well as letters, legal instruments and historical records. However, the great majority of tablets discovered fall in the class of economic documents. In view of their function to record transactions and attest loans and sales it was important that periods of time be noted and signified for future reference. Consequently, various dating systems were devised which would make it possible to regulate the terms of loans and other types of contracts. In early days, each year was designated separately. It was either identified with an event of major importance which had just taken place, as in Babylonia, or associated with the name of a prominent government official, as in Assyria. It was not until around 1500 B.C. that the individual years of a king's reign were simply listed in numerical order. The documents themselves, however, were of limited value and at the expiration of the contract which they recorded were discarded as having fulfilled the function for which they were written. Occurring in great numbers and relatively imperishable, these records lay where they had fallen until dug up by the excavator centuries later, when the chronological data they contained was used to reconstruct the history of the city in which they had been used.

Since, for the most part, the inscriptions which we found had been discarded as useless in antiquity, they were found in pieces together with the general rubbish which accumulated in the houses and streets of ancient oriental villages. To be sure, we did occasionally find tablets which had been stored in jars for safe keeping. But these jars had usually been smashed in the destruction of the house and many of the tablets were damaged. Not infrequently bits of tablets turn up in the mud which the people had used to make their bricks. Furthermore, since very few tablets had been baked in ancient times, great care had to be exercised in extracting them (see Plate IV) and extensive repairs made at the expedition

house before these fragile documents could be made to yield their secrets; careless digging on the part of excavators has frequently damaged important inscriptions. Often a badly damaged tablet must be coated with wax while it is still in the ground. When at least partially baked tablets are uncovered, however, it is only necessary to expose them to the air for a few hours in order to dry them out, after which they may be brushed clean and read.

The most important immediate contribution which inscriptional material can make to the dig in the field is to provide chronological data for the level and locus where the object itself was found. Where this is possible and successive levels can be related to each other in time, or, even more important, associated areas at the same excavation placed in their proper time sequence with regard to each other, the other material uncovered by the archaeologist (architecture, pottery, tools etc.) can be seen in its proper historical perspective. Even where relative dating of anepigraphic material is possible, a much closer relationship and much more precise dating is possible when the evidence of dated business documents is added (see Plate IV). Two examples from the past season will suffice to illustrate.

Inscriptional remains show that the overall time span covered by our expedition this season reaches from the period of the Sumerian monarch Lugalzaggesi (ca. 2500 B.C.) down to the Persian king Darius (ca. 500 B.C.). Three-quarters of this period in history is represented almost without a break in the two areas dug on Tablet Hill. The latest settlement of any size which occupied the top level of Tablet Hill consisted of houses built during the Persian period. The construction of the courtyard of a very fine house dug this year can be dated within 20 years by the discovery of business documents there. For example, immediately on top of the brick pavement of the courtyard, we found a tablet dated to the 17th year of Darius. When this house and courtyard had been completely cleared, mapped and photographed, it was removed in order to reach the level next below. It was then that we discovered, about 30 cm. beneath the pavement, another tablet, this time dated to the accession year of Darius. It was therefore clear that the courtyard, at least, of this house had been constructed between 423 and 406 B.C. Consequently the objects found associated with the house could be placed in their proper historic context.

Another example illustrating the importance of inscriptions for proper interpretation of archaeological discoveries may be found in connection with the temple of Enlil. About 300 yards to the north of Tablet Hill and east of the great ziggurat or Stage Tower, there once stood a temple dedicated to the Sumerian god Enlil. Excavating this building was one of the two major projects undertaken this past season. During only one period in the history of this temple was there sufficient furniture in any of its rooms which would permit a confident identification of their function. Unfortunately, in all of the other periods such extensive reconstruction had occurred, either for the purpose of remodelling or rebuilding the temple, that little remained except the walls. However, the temple building of the Kassite empire fared better. During this period one room in the temple could easily be identified as a *cella* on the basis of structures discovered in it which were recognized as remnants of the podium or altar and offering tables. Careful examination of the brick work in this room indicated that frequent repairs and alterations had been undertaken in a relatively short time. But by whom and at what time it was impossible to tell until inscribed bricks were discovered and read. Fortunately for us, it was the custom of the monarchs who undertook building projects to include a number of inscribed bricks among those used in the construction, thereby gaining credit with gods and men for the work they had performed. These brick inscriptions usually include the name of the sponsoring deity, the name of the reigning monarch with his titles, and some description of the building operations for which the bricks were made. Stamped bricks of this nature, though by no means plentiful, were at least present in the temple *cella* in sufficient numbers so that the order of reconstruction could be ascertained and the persons responsible known. These inscriptions showed us that within a period of approximately 100 years four different kings had made alterations in the temple *cella*. Two miniature walls had been constructed alongside each other around the top of the podium; the first by Kudurenlil and the second, about 30 years later, by Adad-shumusur (see Plate VII). Some 30 years later a new floor or surface was put on the podium by a third Kassite king, Melishipak II. Finally, after about 50 years more had elapsed, paving for the entire *cella* was constructed during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I of Babylon.

A detailed assessment of the tablet collection as a whole must await a thorough scientific study of the separate documents. However, a general

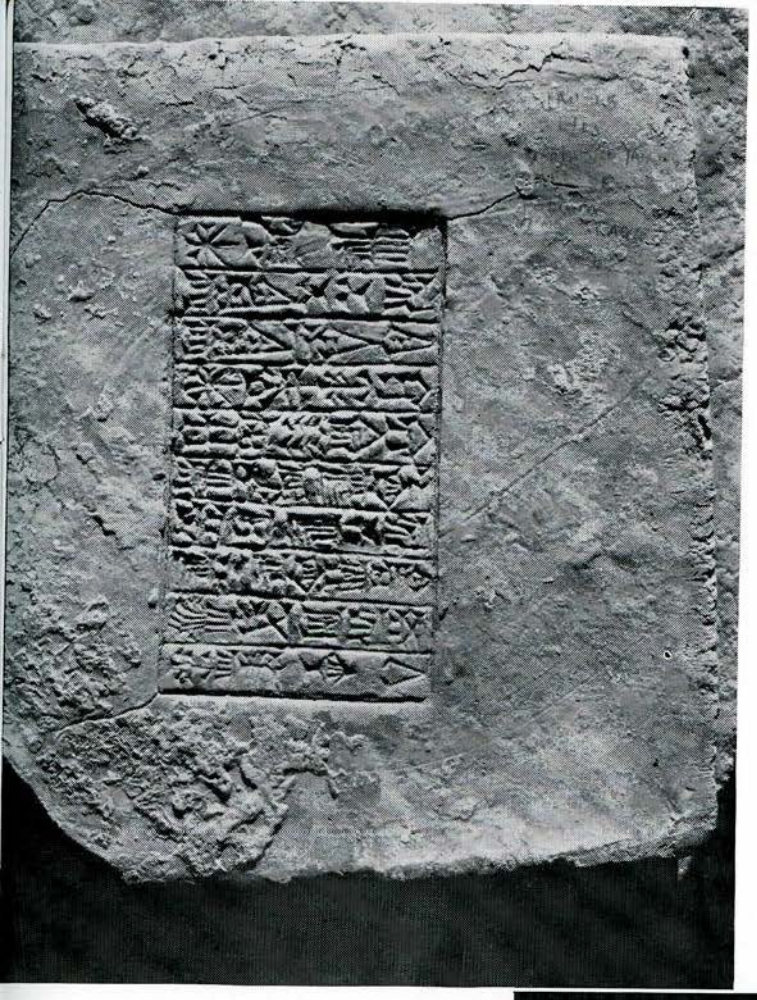
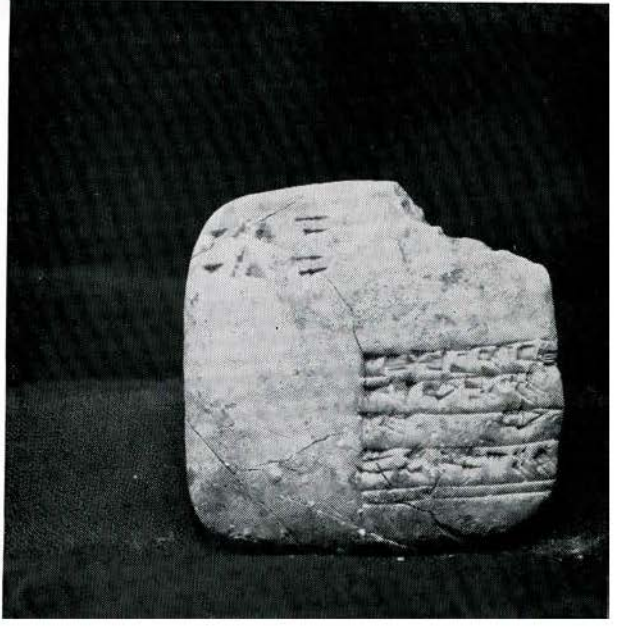


Plate VII

Brick inscription of Kassite king Adad-Shumusur.



Mathematical problem text: to find area of a field.

description of the scope of the material and its significance is appropriate. The major part of the nearly 800 inscriptional items recovered came from the Old Babylonian period (ca. 2000-1700 B.C.). This is true not only as regards the number of inscriptions but also with reference to the most significant ones in the collection. About 70 tablets and fragments bear excerpts of Sumerian literature: hymns, epics, myths, proverbs and the like. This percentage compares favorably with past seasons at Nippur and is in striking contrast to the usual two or three per cent which is the highest any other Babylonian site has yielded. Incidentally, it should be noted that the expectation of finding just such a sizable group of literary fragments had considerable influence on our decision to reopen the dig at Nippur.

Now and again we found groups of tablets under somewhat unusual circumstances. One sizable collection was discovered when we removed a section of earth which had been left during the first season to serve as a ramp up which the workmen carried débris from the excavation. This small piece of ground was left standing a meter or so above the level of the surrounding area which we dug over a year ago, but when a new exit from the dig was cut this year we decided to remove the old ramp. In the course of removing this earth we uncovered a hoard of 26 Assyrian business documents covering a span of a century from Sargon II to Sin-sharishkun. This was a welcome if unexpected surprise, especially since our total find of the previous season in an area 20 meters square amounted to only 28 tablets.

Another collection of business documents turned up later on in a lower level. These tablets will prove useful in further reconstructing old Babylonian history. Not so much because of the economic information they contain but because they were written during the early part of the Isin dynasty from which few tablets have survived. Consequently the new date formulae which they contain will add to the chronological data which enables scholars to piece together the events of a little known period in history.

The past season's dig also turned up a considerable number of so-called school texts. These variegated documents cover a wide range of subjects and often supply much needed information. They include texts which pupils learning the cuneiform script wrote as practice exercises, as well as the sign lists, grammatical paradigms and even the literary excerpts themselves which provided exercise material for the pupil's practice. Our

knowledge of the Sumerian language, the medium of the world's oldest literature, was gained from just such documents. And each newly discovered document of this kind is welcomed as a potential contributor to our slowly growing fund of knowledge about the language and history of the ancient Near East. It does not appear that any especially outstanding tablets of this class were discovered this season. However, every little bit of new information is helpful and it is likely that a careful study will bring to light something important which a cursory survey has overlooked.

To sum up, the tablet collection of the past season at Nippur totalled nearly 800 pieces covering a span of over two thousand years. Some very fine Sumerian texts were recovered, together with many business documents from a little known period in history. To these we must add the purely historical inscriptions, a few mathematical tablets (see Plate VII) and over 200 school texts, to mention the major categories. It is our hope that the more important documents in each class will be studied and published in the coming year so that the data contributed by inscriptional material will be available to all who may be interested in the past history of Iraq in general and of Nippur in particular.

F. R. S.