

Cuneiform in Australian and New Zealand Collections: A First Glimpse

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Abstract: The paper identifies the cuneiform collections in Australia and New Zealand and describes a project aimed at publishing the material they contain.

Since the rediscovery of the civilizations of the Ancient Near East in the middle of the 19th century B.C., hundreds of thousands of cuneiform tablets have been recovered from official excavations and less formal diggings from the cuneiform homeland of Iraq, but also what is today Iran, Syria, Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. Major collections of these tablets are housed in the great museums of the Northern Hemisphere, most famously, the British Museum in London, the Louvre in Paris, the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin, the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, and the Oriental Institute in Chicago in the United States. However, even these large and famous collections with their thousands and tens of thousands of tablets are, so to speak, just the tip of the iceberg. Cuneiform tablets are to be found just about everywhere, in smaller collections in other museums, university libraries, a wide range of other institutions, and in the hands of private collectors. A few hundred, perhaps as many as a thousand, of these tablets have reached collections in Australia and New Zealand. Yet, to date, the vast majority of these tablets remain unpublished, and many of the collections are virtually unknown even to experts in the field of Assyriology.

On September 7-8, 2013, a small group of scholars of the Ancient Near East gathered at The Australian Institute of Archaeology on the campus of La Trobe University to discuss how best to study the cuneiform tablet collections in Australia and New Zealand. Present were the authors of this article, Russell Hobson, Larry Stillman, and Christopher Davey, the Director of the Institute. The program included a survey of the present state of our knowledge of cuneiform collections in Australia and New Zealand, and a discussion of how best to improve and organize this knowledge. At the end of the two days, it was agreed by all present to form a research group, provisionally to be called CANZ (Cuneiform in Australian and New Zealand Collections) with the following three main mandates:

1) To produce a monograph which will gather and present the cuneiform tablets in Australian and New Zealand collections. It is expected that the proposed



Figure 1: A cuneiform tablet from Alalakh Level IV held by the Australian Institute of Archaeology, c 1550BC IA8.505 (AT 132) l. 65, w. 50, d. 25.

book will include an introduction to the topic, a chapter on how the objects reached the southern hemisphere, a catalogue of texts including bibliography for published items, and editions of selected texts.

2) To produce an interactive web-site for educational purposes.

3) To publicize the collections, with an eye towards organizing an international conference to discuss the materials, and ultimately towards an exhibition of the materials for museums and other interested parties in Australia and New Zealand, and beyond.



Figure 2: A Neo-Babylonian barrel inscription held by the Australian Institute of Archaeology IA11.305, l. 175 dia. 100

All the participants agreed that the first step in reaching these goals was to identify those museums and other institutions, public and private, which might possess cuneiform tablets and other objects inscribed in cuneiform. The purpose of this short article is to share what we already know about the collections in Australia and New Zealand, thus provide a first glimpse of the material. However, an even more important goal of the present paper is to publicize the project in the hope that our readers will be able to provide information concerning the locations of tablets and inscribed objects for which even we as yet have no information. The project shall also use Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) to produce enhanced images of the cuneiform materials. The technology will be used in co-operation with La Trobe University.

Australia¹

The Australian Institute of Archaeology

The collection of The Australian Institute of Archaeology is to our knowledge the largest collection in Australia, and by far the best documented. A recent catalogue lists well over 100 items, including materials from Nimrud, Alalakh, and other sites. The Institute's records reveal that a number of tablets received in the 1930s are no longer in its holdings and it is hoped that these tablets may be identified; some are known to be on loan, while others were donated to other institutions.

Benjamin Foster of Yale University published an overview of the collection (Foster 1980).² Approximately one quarter of the collection consists of royal inscriptions on bricks and cylinders, some of which have been integrated into the RIM publications. There are a total of 11 Alalakh tablets listed in the catalogue. These are published by Wiseman, some of them in his main publication of Alalakh tablets (Wiseman 1953), and others in his supplementary article (Wiseman 1954). The five archival texts from the Assyrian capital at Nimrud were published by J. N. Postgate, *The Governor's Palace Archive* (Postgate 1973). There are also a number of economic texts from the Sargonic and Ur III periods and a collection of clay

bullae-dockets. Eight other tablets and a replica of a fourth millennium archaic tablet were published, some with translations all with photographs, in the catalogue of the museum exhibition *Early Writing 8-15*.³ This large collection is being studied by Luis Siddall, Christopher Davey, Russell Hobson, Wayne Horowitz and Larry Stillman, with the cooperation of the Australian Institute for Archaeology's Council.

The Nicholson Museum, the University of Sydney

The Nicholson Museum at the University of Sydney houses 33 cuneiform texts. The collection has a varied provenance including gifts from the British Museum, the Iraq Museum, the Australian Institute of Archaeology and private donors. The texts comprise royal inscriptions from Uruk, Ur, Nimrud, Nineveh and Babylonia; Old Akkadian and Ur III economic texts and a clay bulla. This collection is being studied by Luis Siddall, Wayne Horowitz and Larry Stillman, with the cooperation of Candace Richards and the permission of the Senior Curator, Michael Turner.

The Museum of Ancient Cultures, Macquarie University

The Museum of Ancient cultures is in possession of 22 cuneiform documents. Of the cuneiform documents five are royal inscriptions and have been recently edited and published by Siddall (2013) in CDLB. The remaining 17 documents are archival texts and most of these are Ur III economic tablets. The other documents comprise archaic Sumerian records and some Old Babylonian texts. Luis Siddall is editing these texts, with the cooperation of Karl Van Dyke and the permission of the Museum of Ancient Culture's Management Committee.

Powerhouse Museum (Sydney)

Dr. Paul Donnelly of The Powerhouse Museum has drawn our attention to the four cuneiform texts in the museum's collection. The on-line catalogue indicates that two of the texts are clay cones discovered during Woolley's excavations at Ur and the other two are economic texts from the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods, respectively. Luis Siddall will work on this collection.

Museum of Antiquities, University of New England

The Museum of Antiquities at the University of New England houses three cuneiform texts, which date to the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods. Two are royal inscriptions from the reigns of Gudea and Sin-kāšid, respectively. Both are further exemplars of texts edited in the RIM volumes. The other is an economic text dated to year 47 of Šulgi. The collection is being edited by Luis Siddall in cooperation with Michelle Arens and the permission of the University Curator, Ian Stephenson.

Rare Books and Special Collections Library in Fisher Library, at the University of Sydney

Rare Books and Special Collections Library in the Fisher Library has two cuneiform documents which date to the

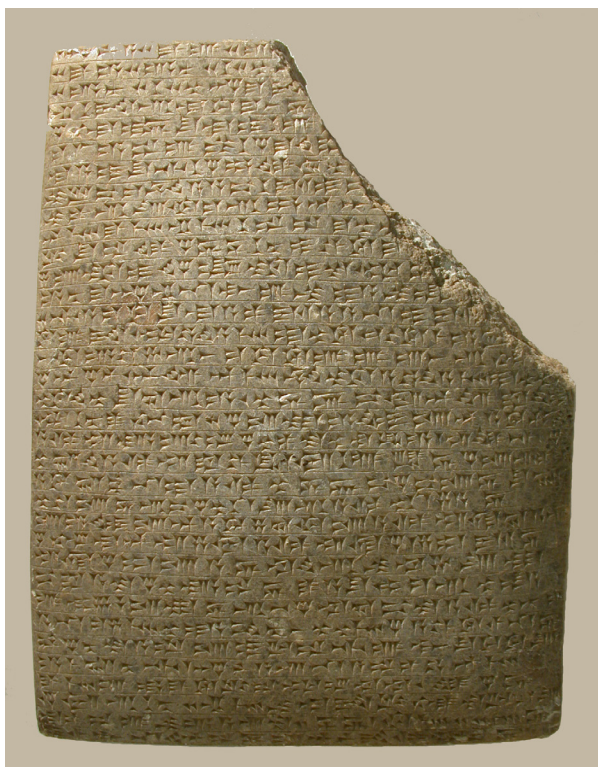


Figure 3: Display inscription belonging to the Neo-Assyrian king Assur-nasir-pal II 883-859 BC. Held by the Australian Institute of Archaeology, from Nimrud, Gypsum, IA5.034, l. 480, w. 370, d. 90

Ur III period. One is a Gudea cone and the other is an economic document. Luis Siddall is editing these tablets, with the cooperation and permission of Jacqueline Grainger.

In addition to these collections, we are also engaged with the cuneiform collections at the Antiquities Museum at the University of Queensland, the Abbey Museum on the Sunshine Coast, the Museum of Classical Archaeology at the University of Adelaide and the John Elliot Museum at the University of Tasmania. Our current knowledge of Australian cuneiform collections is limited to the east coast. Further investigation is required to identify any collections located in the western states.

New Zealand

The Otago Museum, Dunedin

The Otago Museum holds a collection of approximately 150 cuneiform tablets and inscribed objects, making it, to our knowledge, the largest collection in our group. Most of the collection was purchased by Dr. Lindsay Rogers, a Dunedin native who served as Professor of Surgery at the Royal School of Medicine, Baghdad, in Iraq, immediately after World War II, and returned to New Zealand in 1950. The collection includes the expected administrative texts, mostly from the Old Akkadian to Old Babylonian periods, royal inscriptions from the Ur III and Isin-Larsa Periods, and the time of Gudea and Nebuchadnezzar II, but there

are also a number of less common finds including a medical tablet with prescriptions against the Lamaštu-demon that is illustrated by a drawing of the demon. Only one tablet in this collection has been published, this presenting a childbirth incantation and related material (Farber 1984). The collection is being studied by Wayne Horowitz, Larry Stillman, and Peter Zilberg, with the cooperation of Ian Griffin, Moira White, Scott Reeves, and Beth Rees of the Otago Museum, and the permission of the Otago Museum Trust Board.

The Canterbury Museum, Canterbury

Roger Fyfe of The Canterbury Museum reports that the museum holds five original cuneiform documents, all early acquisitions, three from 1888 and two in 1902.

The National Library of New Zealand, Wellington

The National Library of New Zealand web-site offers photographs of three small Sumerian administrative tablets, all apparently from the Ur III period.

Study of the tablets at The Canterbury Museum and National Library of New Zealand, and the search for other cuneiform finds now in New Zealand is only just now beginning.

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Endnotes

- 1 The sequence of collections below is according to approximate number of items in the collection; larger collections first, and smaller collections later.
- 2 Foster also prepared editions of a number of tablets in the collection which were submitted for publication to *Acta Sumerologica* but did not appear in print before the journal suspended publication.
- 3 The Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne and C.J. Davey, *Early Writing*, published by The Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne in association with the Australian Institute of Archaeology, in 2003.