



# Cuneiform Texts in Australian Public Collections: Phase One Complete

Luis R. Siddall

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62614/hz4zf186>

**Abstract:** Cuneiform texts in Australia and New Zealand are being published by a team of scholars. This paper reports on the progress of the work in Australian and lists the material discovered in public collections thus far.

The Cuneiform Texts in Australian and New Zealand Collections (CANZ) project has made a great deal of progress since its announcement in this journal in 2013 (Siddall and Horowitz 2013). The members of the CANZ project have been busily examining the tablets across Australia and New Zealand and it is with much pleasure that we can report that the first 'reconnaissance' phase of the Australian wing of the CANZ project is now complete. The CANZ team is now in the process of cataloguing the entire corpus of cuneiform texts and commencing work on the first two volumes of text editions. The first volume will include all cuneiform texts in the Australian public collections and second will be focused on the extraordinary Otago collection. The progress made by the CANZ team can be followed on social media via Twitter (@projectCANZ) and on Facebook ([www.facebook.com/canzcuneiform](http://www.facebook.com/canzcuneiform)). Previews of the texts in the Otago collection can be found in the articles of Wayne Horowitz *et al.* in this edition of *Buried History* and elsewhere (Horowitz, Stillman & Zilberg 2015; Horowitz, Reeves, Stillman, Zilberg & White 2015; Gibb 2015a; 2015b; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=100&v=yICL418C274>). This paper provides an overview of the cuneiform texts in Australian public collections that will be published in the first volume.

Before discussing the various Australian collections, I would like to take the opportunity to acknowledge the kindness, hospitality and support I have received from the current custodians of these most ancient artefacts. In every city I have been met by interested and enthusiastic staff whose assistance has made this project an even more rewarding experience. I would also like to thank NGS Super who awarded me the 2014 NGS Scholarships that funded my visits to the Australian collections.

There are over 200 cuneiform texts in Australian public collections and they arrived in this country through many avenues. Some collections, such as the Nicholson Museum (Sydney) and the Australian Institute of Archaeology (Melbourne), received a number of cuneiform texts from the major British excavations in Iraq during the early and mid-twentieth century in acknowledgement of the museums' financial support for these excavations. These collections have also received some tablets as gifts from

the Iraqi government. Some collections have benefitted from private donors. A significant source of cuneiform tablets in these collections has been from the high-end of the antiquities market. Charles Ede Ltd., in particular, has done rather well from the purchases by Australian museums and public libraries.

The cuneiform inscriptions are recorded in a variety of media, with clay tablets, cones and bricks being the most common. The texts are mostly royal inscriptions and everyday administrative texts, but there are also some letters and rarer genres such as mathematical and astronomical texts. Members of the public who wish to see cuneiform tablets and other Near Eastern artefacts should visit the places discussed below.

The collections of Australian Institute of Archaeology (AIA), The Nicholson Museum and the Fisher Library Rare Book Collection at the University of Sydney, The Museum of Ancient Cultures at Macquarie University, The Powerhouse Museum and the Museum of Antiquities at the University of New England have been discussed previously by Siddall and Horowitz (2013), and so will not be reviewed here. It should be noted, however, that the AIA collection is now being photographed using Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) technology which produces outstanding digital files of cuneiform tablets. What follows is an overview of the public collections I visited in 2014 and 2015, listed by state and alphabetic order.

## **Australian Capital Territory**

The nation's capital has one Ur III document housed in the **Classics Museum** at the Australian National University.

## **New South Wales**

The **State Library of New South Wales** in Sydney is the one collection in the state not covered in the previous article. It has one foundation tablet from the reign of Sîn-kāšid, the ruler of Uruk in southern Mesopotamia.

## **Queensland**

The **Abbey Museum of Art and Archaeology**, located on the Sunshine Coast, has a particularly interesting collection of cuneiform texts. It houses three royal inscriptions (a brick fragment from the reign of the Assyrian king,

Tukultī-Ninurta I, and two Gudea cones), administrative documents from the Ur III and Neo-Babylonian periods, and two rather important Late Babylonian period scholarly tablets. Preliminary assessments of the tablets suggest that one is an astronomical diary and the other is concerned with incantations. These are the only known scholarly tablets in Australia.

The other collections in Queensland are smaller than the Abbey Museum but no less interesting. The **RD Milns Antiquities Museum** at the University of Queensland has a brick inscription from the reign of the Elamite king, Untaš-Napiriša, and an Ur III tablet from Drehem. The **State Library of Queensland** in Brisbane has four texts: two Nebuchadnezzar II brick inscriptions, a Sîn-kāšid foundation tablet and an Ur III economic text with an envelope. The **Green Hill Fort Museum** on Thursday Island has one Ur III tablet which records the delivery of bundles of reeds.

### South Australia

There are two collections of cuneiform texts in Adelaide. The **Museum of Classical Archaeology** has four texts in their permanent collection (an Old Babylonian letter, an Old Babylonian contract and two Ur III administrative documents) and a Nebuchadnezzar II brick which is on loan from the South Australian Museum. The **State Library of South Australia** has two texts: a Nebuchadnezzar II brick and an Old Akkadian administrative document.

### Tasmania

There are three collections of cuneiform texts in Tasmania. The **John Elliot Classics Museum** at the University of Tasmania has two cuneiform texts: a Gudea cone and an Ur III administrative document comprising a tablet and its envelope. The **Museum of Old and New Art** has a particularly interesting context for its collection. The cuneiform texts are a part of a major artwork on display in the MONA called *Kryptos* by Brigita Ozolins (<http://brigitaozolins.com/work/book-and-word/kryptos-2011/>). In this artwork, four cuneiform texts are, rather fittingly, embedded in the walls in clear containers: a Sîn-iddinam barrel inscription, a mathematical text, an Ashurnasirpal II brick inscription and a Gudea cone. The **Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery** owns one administrative Ur III tablet from Drehem.

### Victoria

In addition to the Australian Institute of Archaeology, Victoria is home to three public collections of cuneiform texts. The **Ian Potter Museum of Art** at the University of Melbourne has a rather important collection of six Elamite royal inscriptions on bricks. There are also two fragments of documents from the Neo- or Late- Babylonian period and an Ur III administrative document. The **National Gallery of Victoria** has 16 texts ranging mostly from the end of the third millennium and the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. There are a number of royal inscriptions in the collection: one Gudea cone, three cones and a brick inscription from

the reign of Ur-Nammu of Ur, and a series of fragments of bricks from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II. The collection also contains a number of administrative documents: 4 from the Ur III period and three from the Neo-Babylonian period. The entire collection has been studied by the late Oxford Assyriologist, Jeremy Black, sometime in the 1990s. An unpublished manuscript of his study exists and it contains transliterations of many of the texts and excellent hand copies. The **State Library of Victoria** is home to one Ur III tablet from Drehem recording the delivery of livestock (<http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/318487>).

Phase One is complete. However, there is still much to do and the CANZ team is looking forward to producing the books on the cuneiform texts in Australia and New Zealand. Once the academic work is completed, the project will produce print and on-line resources for teachers and students at a high school level to support the teaching and learning of ancient history and archaeology in the respective curricula in Australia and New Zealand.

Luis R. Siddall  
Macquarie University

### References

- Black, J.A. undated National Gallery of Victoria: Inscribed Objects from Ancient Mesopotamia, unpublished study.
- Gibb, J. 2015a Inscription One of Five Known, *The Otago Daily Times*, Friday 14 August: <http://www.odt.co.nz/news/dunedin/352457/inscription-one-five-known>
- Gibb, J. 2015b. Ancient Texts Draw Researchers, *The Otago Daily Times*, Sunday 20 September: <http://www.odt.co.nz/campus/university-otago/356402/ancient-texts-draw-researchers>
- Horowitz W., L. Stillman & P. Zilberg 2015: Cuneiform Texts in the Otago Museum, *Nouvelles Assyriologiques Brèves et Utilitaires* 2015/2, No. 65.
- Horowitz, W., S. Reeves, L. Stillman, P. Zilberg, & M. White 2015 Cuneiform Texts in The Otago Museum: A preliminary report, *Buried History* 51, 53-7.
- Siddall, L.R. & W. Horowitz 2013 Cuneiform in Australian and New Zealand Collections: A First Glimpse, *Buried History* 49, 53-6.