

DIYALA PROJECT

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Another message came in as I was replying to the previous one. “I changed the layout, rearranged the find number display. Comments, please.” Switching over to the web browser again, reloading the page that had already been discussed in various e-mails. “Looking a lot better that way — now could you ...?”

I am in my office at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. It’s a Friday afternoon. Friday means the end of the week, no teaching — and catching up with the “real” work. Friday also means that George Sundell is sitting in room 226b at the Oriental Institute, bombarding me with questions. A good dozen today, certainly more to come

Two and a half years have passed since I left the Oriental Institute for Toronto. I had been told that one never really leaves the OI — something that I have come to realize over time. My own research has not changed much in focus. I continue to co-direct Hamoukar (see separate report) as a joint Syrian Department of Antiquities-Oriental Institute project. From my daily e-mail, which contains numerous exchanges with colleagues in Chicago, it would be hard to tell that I am even outside of the building. And yet a lot has changed. Phone and Internet are useful means of exchanging information, but they cannot replace the personal interaction with colleagues. Great ideas and big solutions develop over long discussions, not during five-minute phone calls. The dynamics that develop when looking at objects together or even just pointing at an item on a computer screen will only be appreciated fully when they are missed.

Nowhere did I feel this change more than in the Diyala Project. Having written my dissertation on the material and taken over this project in 2001 after my graduation, it had become my *raison d’être* at the Oriental Institute. Even more than Hamoukar, the Diyala excavations are intrinsically connected to the Oriental Institute. The significance of these excavations for Mesopotamian archaeology can hardly be overstated. Throughout the nineteenth century much of Near Eastern archaeology was little more than a treasure hunt, largely organized by Europe’s and North America’s great museums in their quest to acquire more artifacts for display. A focus on “museum-quality” artifacts had little use for the many items of daily use, such as tools, weapons, implements, or toys made of stone, clay, metal, or bone found during excavation, which generally were not collected at all. Archaeological and architectural contexts, if recorded at all, were of secondary importance. Despite notable exceptions — such as the French expedition at Khorsabad during the 1840s and 1850s and the German projects at Babylon and Assur between 1897 and 1917 — this situation had not improved much by the early twentieth century. New standards of excavation and recording were reached during Leonard Woolley’s groundbreaking work at Ur, sponsored by the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania Museum. By the end of the 1920s, however, Mesopotamia’s early history still was patched together from historical and pseudo-historical sources of Mesopotamian and biblical origin. Artifacts largely were dated through inscribed items. Scholars knew more about Akkadian sculpture and seals than about Akkadian palaces, temples, or houses, let alone about the way that an Akkadian family would have lived. Most

of what was known about prehistory was patched together from mythological sources, with prehistoric artifacts almost randomly assigned to “flood” or “pre-flood” strata.

Excavation and recording strategies of the Diyala Expedition differed radically from those approaches. Directed by Henri Frankfort, four large sites (Tell Agrab, Tell Asmar, Ishchali, Khafaje) in the Diyala region to the northeast of Baghdad were excavated between 1930 and 1938 on a large and comprehensive scale. In addition to administrative and cultic complexes, some of the largest exposures of domestic architecture ever were made at Khafaje and Tell Asmar. Wherever possible, buildings were excavated layer by layer, revealing their architectural history and allowing a stratigraphic recording of finds. In several areas, excavations were taken to virgin soil, in one case extending over a total depth of 16 meters. All archaeological finds, including pottery, were collected and cataloged carefully. The data recovered by the Diyala excavation for the first time allowed the reconstruction of Mesopotamia’s early archaeological history from the late fourth (Jemdet Nasr period) to the early second millennium BC (Old Babylonian period). Dates like “Akkadian” or “Ur,” periods that previously had been defined by inscriptional evidence and datable artwork, now received archaeological components by adding architectural complexes, pottery types, and tools and utensils associated with daily use to their known inventories. The proto-historic periods of the earlier third millennium, whose dating so heavily had been interwoven with the biblical and Mesopotamian flood stories (for example, during the Field Museum’s excavations at Kish Y Cemetery), now were phased into Early Dynastic periods that were based on archaeologically manifested levels and artifact assemblages. To the present day, the Diyala sequence (together with the subsequently excavated Nippur Inanna Temple sequence; see separate report on Nippur) remains the backbone of Mesopotamia’s early historical chronology. With most excavations in Iraq still on hold, much more restrictive funding, and the large-scale destruction of many sites in Iraq due to post-war looting, this situation is unlikely to change soon.

As pointed out in earlier reports, the Diyala excavations were followed by a large-scale publication project between 1938 and 1988, during which five architectural and four artifact-based volumes appeared. Ironically, the vast corpus of 15,000 “miscellaneous” items such as tools, weapons, jewelry, beads, implements, over 1,000 tablets, and several hundred sealings, had remained unpublished. More than half a century had passed since the end of the excavations when in 1992 McGuire Gibson launched the Diyala Project with the intent of finally getting these items published. In previous *Annual Reports* I have written extensively about the way that our changing approaches to this data set also changed the planned end product. What originally had been planned as a multi-volume book publication and a CD set later on eventually turned into a web-based database.

Technological advances during these times turned into both a blessing and a curse. Database applications for desktop computers were a relative novelty in 1992, but they turned into a perfect vehicle to manage data from field registers and object cards. Relational components allowed us to add links to individual images or type drawings without the need of duplication. In some respects, however, rapid technological advances also impeded our progress. We were forced to change database applications twice, and finally decided to use Oracle as the underlying back-end application. Since 2003 George Sundell, who joined the project in 2000 as data architect, systematically transferred the data into an Oracle-based layout.

There is no denying that there have been, and still are, numerous hitches and snags. The data layout had to be modified and expanded, all of which took a lot of rethinking. The most significant impediment, however, was not connected to computers or technology

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at all but to the idiosyncrasies of analog paper trails. Calling some of the Diyala records idiosyncratic does not mean that they are “bad.” On the contrary – many of them are very detailed, but they do not lend themselves to systematic computer entries (fig. 1). Moreover, years of excavation and post-excavation work left visible marks of ongoing thought processes – some entries had been crossed out, written over, or augmented. Some of these changes represent improvements, but quite often details were sacrificed toward more simplified entries. Perhaps the most important recognition of all was the realization of how much archaeological data was recorded in the field and how comparatively little in the end was published. Substantial buildings such as the Northern Palace at Tell Asmar, for which hundreds of pages of field notes and locus and object cards exist, were summarized in a few pages.

Why did this matter so much to us in the context of object publications? The physical description of an object, if available for study, can be verified and improved upon if necessary. As far as the archaeological context of an object is concerned, however, we have to rely on the words of the excavators. Since the 1930s the way in which archaeological data is being used clearly had changed. The primary purpose of recording artifact contexts during the Diyala excavation was the establishment of a chronological framework. Datable artifacts could date a building level, while building levels, in turn, could organize otherwise undatable artifacts into a relative sequence, often providing an absolute date by association with a datable artifact. The idea of a functional analysis of buildings by studying artifact patterns and distributions on a horizontal scale, as often is done today, had not really been developed in the 1930s and is certainly not reflected in the published Diyala volumes. The notes of some of the excavators, however, clearly indicate that they were thinking along such lines. Some of them were far ahead of



Figure 1. Top left: Entry by Conrad Preusser into 1930/31 field register for statue fragment Kh. I 280 (OIM A9049) from Khafaje, indicating details of provenience in narrative and sketch. Top right: photo of Temple Oval at Khafaje, showing findspot of Kh. I 280; bottom left: close-up of Kh. I 280, showing find relationship with alabaster head Kh. I 279 (OIM A9055A); bottom right: photo of statue fragment Kh. I 280

their times, as shown in the field register entries by Conrad Preusser for 1930/31. Preusser, a former member of Walter Andrae's Assur expedition, carefully recorded proveniences of artifacts either by sketching their findspots or by triangulation (fig. 1). The recordings of tablet findspots and sealings by Thorkild Jacobsen, the expedition's field epigrapher, at the Palace of the Rulers were detailed enough to allow me to undertake a pattern analysis for a detailed functional study of the building over its 250 year lifetime (fig. 2).

In short, while Iraq itself was inaccessible for archaeological work the potential of "re-excavating" an old excavation through their documentation existed, having been undertaken successfully by other scholars at the sites of Nippur, Assur, and Ur. In order to provide scholars worldwide with access to the unpublished archaeological data we had to make it accessible. This proved to be a monumental task. Supported by two National Endowment for the Humanities grants between 2004 and 2010, we scanned and photographed over 30,000 notebook pages, object cards, maps, and field negatives. Karen Terras, project volunteer since 2004 and staff member between 2007 and 2009, scanned field notebooks and diaries and indexed the correspondence exchanged between the Diyala Expedition and the Oriental Institute administration. Robert Wagner took on the formidable task of scanning all the Diyala negatives. Field registers that were too large or documents that were too brittle to be scanned were photographed by Larry Lissak with a high-resolution Digital SLR camera. While the digitization of these materials is now complete, the process of indexing them continues, undertaken jointly by myself and Mike Fisher, student assistant and project coordinator.

The Diyala database continues to be developed by George Sundell. In the past year much of the archaeological data — field registers, diaries, object and locus cards, and photographs — were added to the database. Keyword schema for objects, buildings, and loci are either in full development or in revision. George has been busy with the development of new screens and layouts. Over the past two years, four releases of the database have been sent to the University of Chicago's IT services. After completing archival photography, Larry has focused on photographing those artifacts that either were not documented at all or only insufficiently. We are getting close to a public release of the database, though data revisions need to be

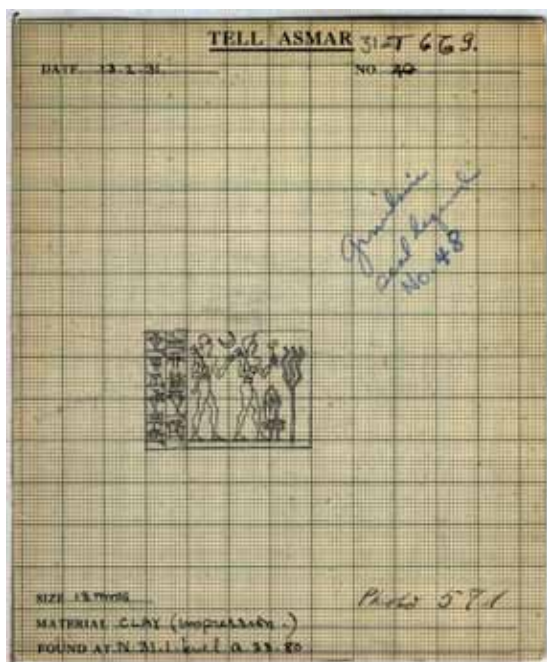


Figure 2. Top: Object card for As. 30:T.216 with seal of Ašubliel (a servant of Ešnunna's ruler Ibalpiel) recording find date and provenience of sealing; bottom: photograph of As. 30:T.216

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completed beforehand. While our own work continues, our digital acquisition of the Diyala documentation has already benefitted others. Using our scans, the Publications Office was able to significantly improve the quality of the images in their PDF reproduction of Henri Frankfort's 1955 *Stratified Cylinder Seals from the Diyala Region* (OIP 72).

The often administrative and downright "clerical" nature of much of this work occasionally might overshadow our fundamentally academic interest in this material, though this picture truly is misleading. Over the past two years I was able to re-study and re-photograph all the clay sealings and sealed tablets from the Palace of the Rulers at Tell Asmar. Angela Altenhofen, who

already worked as an illustrator for Karen Wilson's Bismaya project, undertook the arduous task of drawing the Diyala seal impressions, often from as many as twenty or more partially overlapping (but always incomplete) impressions (fig. 3). The fact that many of them were inscribed provided an extra challenge — one, however, that Angela mastered most admirably by teaching herself the basics of cuneiform writing. By the end of the year I hope to be done with the description and editing of more than 2,000 photographs and more than 100 composite seal drawings, allowing me to finally publish a revised version of my dissertation on the Palace of the Rulers.

A colleague once remarked to me that "once you publish your stuff, work on it only begins." I have no illusions about the fact that the Diyala material will not disappear from my life even after the launch of the Diyala website and the publication of my volume. It is a great testimony to the diligence of the Diyala excavators that, eighty years after the end of the excavation, their work holds up and still continues to inspire us.



Figure 3. Top: photographs of As. 35:T.99, a clay tag with two impressions of a seal held by Ilanum, a servant of Ešnunna's ruler Ušrawassu (ca. 1980 BC); bottom: composite drawing of the seal by Angela Altenhofen

