

TABLET COLLECTION

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This year was an exciting and busy one for the Tablet Collection of the Oriental Institute. Over the past twelve months we welcomed several scholars from all over the world to the OI to study our tablets, including Annalisa Azzoni (Vanderbilt University), Mark Garrison (Trinity University), Fumi Karahashi (Chuo University, Japan), Yuval Levavi (Bar-Ilan University, Israel), Reinhard Pirngruber (Austrian Academy of Sciences), and Daniel Schwemer (University of Würzburg, Germany). The tablets studied span a wide range of topics and time periods: administrative tablets from the third and first millennium BCE, tablets from Persepolis, and ritual texts.

While these scholars worked in the Tablet Room, the staff of the Tablet Collection also supported other projects by providing photographs for research purposes to several other scholars. These scholars include Jay Crisostomo (University of Michigan), Benjamin R. Foster (Yale University), Maynard P. Maidman (York University, Canada), and Magnus Widell (University of Liverpool, UK). Additionally, we granted others publication rights to selected tablets, so further publications can be expected.

As usual, the cuneiformists at the OI made good use of the collection for their own research projects and teaching. Andrew Wilent, our assistant curator, and Howard Farber published an Old Babylonian tablet from Nippur that contains important information about the king Sumu-album. Other OI scholars also featured tablets in diverse outreach and educational projects. For example, Hervé Reculeau presented several tablets about irrigation work in his gallery talk “Land, Water, Gods, and the King,” while Ilona Zsolnay included several tablets in her presentation “Judging a Cuneiform Tablet by its Proverbial Cover.” Susanne Paulus, the curator, also showed tablets at the University of Chicago’s Humanities Day; her talk, “Fake! Ancient and Modern Forgeries,” included several forgeries that she and Andrew Wilent had identified over the past year. Additionally, she presented part of our collection in a workshop organized by Sam Harris titled Teaching with Material Culture, during the 10th International Congress of Hittitology (held at the OI) and the OI’s Research Fair.

One groundbreaking change made over the past year is the introduction of the Tablet Collection Volunteer Program. While the program initially began in October with one volunteer, Susan Padula, there are now four regular volunteers. Because the tablet room is not regularly staffed except by the assistant curator, the hours provided by these volunteers are vital for important projects. One of the biggest concerns is the preservation of our cuneiform tablets. Susan Padula assessed the physical condition of over 1,500 individual tablets, reporting on both physical damage and inadequate housing. So far, it seems that only 25% of our tablets are in good condition, while the others are in need of conservation mainly on account of damage done by salination, cracking and flaking, and glue residues left by older conservation work. Of the surveyed tablets, 36% are inadequately housed in boxes made out of acidic paper unsuitable for long-term storage, while 93% of our tablets are stored on organic cotton wool, which can damage tablets in poor condition. Although these preliminary numbers are not promising, they will undoubtedly help in applying for funding for improved storage and conservation of our valuable tablets.

With the help of the volunteers, we have also begun making photographic documentation of our collection. Pictures of our tablets are part of the OI Integrated Database (IDB) and the Cuneiform Digital Library Projects, the latter of which includes information and photographs of cuneiform tab-



TOP: Terry Friedman scans cuneiform tablets.
 BOTTOM: Susan Padula checks the condition of a tablet.

lets from many collections around the world. So far, however, only our published tablets — less than one-third of our collection — have been photographed. As a result, interest in our unpublished material has been limited. In February, the Tablet Room started digitizing the unpublished tablets with the help of three volunteers, Terry Friedman, Janet Helman, and Toni Smith. The three of them are responsible for scanning the tablets on a high-resolution flatbed scanner, which produces readable images of the tablets. As tablets are three-dimensional objects, each tablet is scanned six times to provide complete coverage of the obverse, reverse, and all four edges. Thus far, 500 tablets — around 12% of our unpublished tablets — have been scanned. During post-production, all six scans for each tablet will be united into one picture, and the images will be added to the IDB, first for internal research.

A third major project was also completed this year. During renovations of the basement where the cuneiform tablets are housed, it became apparent that our tablet molds were in need of better stor-

age. These latex models were made from tablets excavated by the OI that either stayed in their countries of origin or were sent to other collections. With the help of these molds, one can produce readable plaster casts, many of which are frequently used by international scholars. Because several of our molds were housed in decomposing cardboard boxes, we had to act quickly. Over the course of several weeks, the assistant curator moved all of the molds and related materials to more durable, weatherproof containers.

It is the pleasure of the curator to thank our amazing volunteers for all their work. Special thanks also go this year to the assistant curator, Andrew Wilent, for his exceptional service for the Tablet Collection since 2015. He not only fulfilled all tasks, but often went above and beyond his job description by doing additional research for many projects. At the end of this year, Andrew received the prestigious Oppenheim Dissertation Fellowship, which unfortunately does not permit outside work. Andrew Wilent is followed by Colton Siegmund, PhD student in Cuneiform Studies, as assistant curator.