

## Tablets from Tell Abū Ṣalābīkh, Iraq

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Readers of earlier issues of the Oriental Institute's annual report will recall that the Oriental Institute conducted brief soundings in Iraq in 1963 and 1965 at a site known as Tell Abū Ṣalābīkh ("Father of the Flints"), about twelve miles from Nippur. Like Nippur, the mound of Abū Ṣalābīkh lies on the presumed ancient course of the Euphrates. Only small areas of this early period (about 2600 B.C.) were reached at Nippur, since they lie very far below the present surface of the mound. Consequently, the site of Abū Ṣalābīkh is all the more important to the work being done in central Sumer.

Among the finds of the 1963 sounding were a number of clay tablet fragments, some of which I considered to be from Sumerian literary compositions. This judgment was vindicated in 1965, when we came upon a great heap of tablets, including many large and well preserved examples, in what appeared to be an ancient rubbish pile (the tablets were mixed with sherds, pieces of bitumen and quantities of fish bones). The tablets were in a very delicate condition because of the millennial growth of salt crystals in every crack. They were nevertheless safely removed and baked in the kilns at Nippur and reconstructed.

It will probably be many years before the literary texts can be translated with confidence, for there are serious impediments to understanding them: (1) the script is only partially deciphered, (2) the signs within each line are often not written in the sequence in which they are to be read, (3) there was still a great flexibility in the use of homophones (signs which sound the same but have different meanings), and (4) many of the parts of words, especially infixes and suffixes, upon which so much depends in our understanding of Sumerian, could presumably be supplied easily by the reader and were therefore omitted. Nevertheless, enough has been understood and identified to change radically the ideas we have held of the written tradition of Sumerian literature.

The material contained in these tablets is proving to be of extraordinary interest. One of the most startling findings is that approximately half the names of the scribes who wrote the

texts are Semitic. It had previously been assumed that the Semitic people living in central Sumer at this time were unsophisticated tribesmen who lived in tents and tended herds. The new evidence indicates that at least some of these Semites were living in an urban situation and had entered the highly technical area of Sumerian scholarship and learning.

Because the archaic Sumerian texts are so difficult to understand, it was long thought that all the texts which were not business documents were all lists of words used by scribes in their training. A large number of such tablets were found at the site of Shuruppak, about forty miles from Abū Ṣalābīkh, excavated by Germans seventy years ago. But they had been published for forty years before anyone realized that there were any texts that were not lists of words. The first to be recognized were some incantations twenty years ago, and then about ten years ago several proverbs were identified.

The Abū Ṣalābīkh literary texts now give definite proof that Sumerian poetry was already being written down many centuries earlier than had been generally thought. The first Abū Ṣalābīkh text recognized to have a parallel from the classical period of Sumerian literature (about the eighteenth century B.C.) was a composition known as the "Instructions of Shuruppak." (Shuruppak was the Sumerian Noah who survived the Flood; the instructions are words of advice to his son about how to live and conduct his life.) Many sections of the classical Sumerian version and the archaic Sumerian version correspond, although the older version has spellings which it would be difficult to understand without the later version.

An even more striking example of the high antiquity of the written Sumerian tradition is a composition known as the "Kesh Temple Hymn," a hymn of praise to the famous temple of the goddess of birth at Kesh. Fragments of at least three copies of the text were found at Tell Abū Ṣalābīkh. In this instance, the older text agrees word for word with the examples from eight centuries later, showing that far from being a composition written down in the eighteenth century B.C., it was already a very old and traditional text.

The inscriptions from Tell Abū Ṣalābīkh, on which I have worked for many years, are now ready for publication. It can be expected that they will be a rich source for others to study the work of the first great flowering of the Sumerian literary and scholarly creativity.