

RESEARCH

Walter Farber

Walter Farber started the academic year on a very pleasant note. Having been invited to the Netherlands' Institute of Advanced Studies in Wassenaar, he joined an international group of historians of medicine, classicists, and Assyriologists in a colloquium called "Rationality and Irrationality in Babylonian and Greek Medicine." He presented a paper on the concept of contagiousness, combining evidence from Old Babylonian letters (mostly from the royal archives of Mari) and later ritual texts. His presentation entitled "How to Marry a Disease: Epidemics, Contagion, and a Magic Ritual Against the Hand of the Ghost" led to a lively discussion of an otherwise often overlooked aspect of "rationality" in Mesopotamian science and is going to be published in the proceedings of the symposium. Otherwise, Wassenaar

proved to be a great place to meet old friends, make new ones, and have as good a time as any scholarly meeting can possibly provide.

From Wassenaar, his wife Gertrud Farber and he traveled directly to the Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale in Helsinki, where they restricted their scholarly activities to listening — one full week of “Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East” was almost more than one could digest, but again the familiar atmosphere of the Rencontre and many new contacts made the trip more than worthwhile. On the way back through Norway, they experienced the midnight sun at the North Cape, did some mountain hiking in ever-changing weather conditions, and on really rainy days indulged in medieval stave churches.

Back home in Chicago, still another invitation was waiting for Farber, this time to the Fourth International Colloquium of the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft, held in Münster in February 2002. The topic, “Culture of Knowledge in the Ancient Near East: Philosophy of Life, Sciences, Techniques, Technologies,” brought an interesting group of scholars from different subfields together. His contribution on the role Lamaštu incantations played in the Babylonian curriculum and in medical practice elicited some stimulating comments and discussion with colleagues. On the social level, he especially enjoyed the opportunity to meet some German students and younger scholars whom he, as an “expatriate,” had until then known by name only.

Farber’s new tasks as curator of the Oriental Institute’s tablet collection brought another interesting aspect into a never-dull life. One of the first tablets he handled after his appointment proved to be an intriguing Sumerian text with incantations used in the ritual investiture of a novice priest in the temple. An edition of this text that has combined Gertrud Farber’s Sumerological prowess with his own experience in magical texts is now in press.

Finally, he would like to mention — with thanks going to his students — a course he taught in the spring quarter of 2002. Building on the evidence collected for his Wassenaar paper, he and his students read all the Akkadian letters (from Old Akkadian through Neo-Assyrian and Late Babylonian) dealing with disease and medical procedures. Rarely has he seen a group of students so eager and able to follow a topic that has been close to his heart for a long time. He has every hope that the students enjoyed their work just as much as he did!

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