Jesper Eidem, Cécile Michel

Some Mesopotamian Challenges: A History Based on Tablets Unevenly Distributed in Time and Space

Abstract: The more than three millennia of ancient Mesopotamian cuneiform tablets, yearly augmented by new finds from sites across the Middle East, provide a unique and, at times, extremely detailed historical record. The information, however, is very unevenly distributed in time and space – as illuminating *flashes* rather than comprehensive overviews. The authors of this chapter draw on cuneiform sources from sites in early second millennium Anatolia and Upper Mesopotamia to exemplify the challenges which even very rich material poses to modern scholars, challenges which we believe will remain even as the cuneiform record inevitably grows substantially in the future.

1 Introduction

Simple tablets of clay inscribed with cuneiform characters are our main sources for what has been called 'half of history' – from the invention of cuneiform in Lower Iraq sometime around 3300 BCE and into the first century CE.[1] Cuneiform first became known through monumental inscriptions, and deciphered principally with the aid of the trilingual Behistun inscription in the middle of the nineteenth century CE. Clay tablets with cuneiform signs also began to appear and to be recognised as such at many new excavations at sites in Iraq, ancient Mesopotamia and other parts of the Near East. Large collections of cuneiform tablets were found and helped to illuminate an otherwise virtually lost world. These collections of manuscripts were called 'archives' by Assyriologists.[2] This is not the place to discuss the history of discovery, which will be generally well-known,[3] but it may be relevant to recall that the evidence now available has a

1 Michalowski 2021; Michel 2021a, who explains why clay cuneiform tablets are manuscripts.

2 For convenience, we also use the word 'archive' for any group of tablets found physically together, but this term, of course, covers a variety of different concrete situations (Veenhof 1986; Pedersén 1998; Brosius 2003; Faraguna 2013; Bausi et al. 2018).

3 Fontan 1994; Larsen 1996; Chevalier 2002; among others.

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wide distribution in time and space, as shown on the map (Fig. 1), which highlights only the sites of discovery of more than 500 tablets.

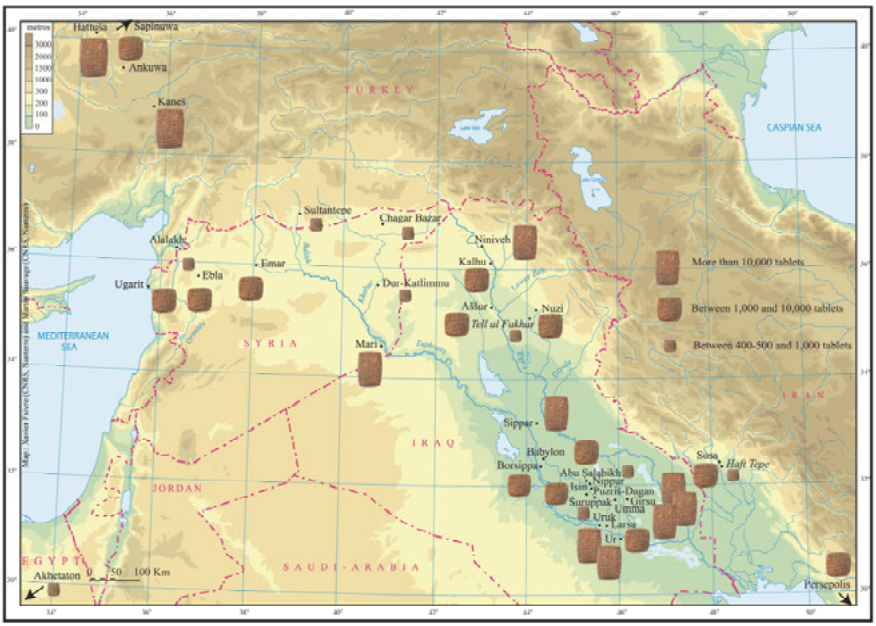

Fig. 1: Map showing the main sites where cuneiform tablets have been found, prepared by Xavier Faivre and Martin Sauvage, and translated from Lion and Michel 2016, 9.

We can very basically distinguish three main categories of tablets: the first two categories, which will not be our concern here, are those which are of scholarly content and part of the stream of scientific, religious and literary tradition, and the official and display texts reflecting royal power and propaganda.[4] The last and by far the largest category are tablets of everyday content: letters, bills, account lists, contracts, in short, the kind of documents most of us have in our own drawers at home. Needless to say this is a precious and globally unique kind of evidence. Many tablets – of unbaked clay – have survived fairly intact in the dry Middle Eastern climate and can now provide *flash* insights into human

4 For a modern categorization of cuneiform texts, see the attempt made by a French and British team in the CDLI:wiki, <https://cdli.ox.ac.uk/wiki/doku.php?id=text_typologies> (accessed on 1 September 2022).

affairs thousands of years ago. The denseness of some of this evidence is truly remarkable – the best example is perhaps provided by the family archives excavated in houses of the early second millennium merchant settlement in Kaneš (Central Anatolia), and to which we will return below.

While such *flashes* of information and deep insights are fascinating, they should not mask the real difficulties ancient Near Eastern scholars have in weaving together coherent narratives – not to mention structural comprehension – of ancient societies from them. This is, of course, not a new observation. The same *caveat* can be found in numerous studies on Mesopotamian history.[5] But is there a solution to this problem?

An obvious answer could be simply patience: fairly loose estimates of the total number of tablets unearthed and now in public and private collections – some hidden from view – easily approach the figure of one million,[6] but this is, no doubt, but a fraction of the tablets still hidden in the thousands of ancient settlement mounds strewn across the vast areas of the Middle East where cuneiform script was in use. The real number is, naturally, a wild guess, but we would not be surprised if the retrievable number of tablets approaches or exceeds a hundred million. Therefore, one view could have it that we may simply wait for more of this hidden treasure to become available and the many overlapping *flashes*, which will then eventually throw more solid light on ancient realities. It is, indeed, easy to quote examples which might support such a view. Apart from the Old Assyrian archives from Kaneš already mentioned, the best example is undoubtedly the trove of information and insights provided by the unexpected find of a large mid-third millennium state archive in Tell Mardikh, ancient Ebla (north-west Syria), in 1974 – a corpus which has opened up a wide new horizon on the history of Upper Mesopotamia.[7] But – and this is fundamental – even with more millions of new tablets, the evidence will remain *flash*-like and challenging for historians. In this situation, it is important to raise awareness of what is really at stake. Which factors have structured the survival of the evidence available, and presumably also the evidence which will become avail-

5 See e.g. Van de Mieroop 1999; Zettler 2003.

6 A fairly recent and careful attempt to assess a total count of known tablets and their total text matter reaches the figure of *c*. 500,000 cuneiform texts (Streck 2010), but is clearly on the low side. The large number of manuscripts and inscriptions in private or hidden collections or circulating on the market are difficult to estimate. An instructive indication, just a small tip of the iceberg, is provided by the listing of some 1,700 cuneiform tablets offered for sale by major auction houses in recent decades (Theis 2017; Theis 2021; Theis 2022).

7 Matthiae 2021.

able in the future. To illustrate this, we briefly discuss two examples drawn from Anatolia and Upper Mesopotamia in the early second millennium BCE.

Table 1: Chronological chart showing main sites and rulers mentioned in the text (all dates BCE).

Kaneš	Aššur	Mari	Babylon
Level II *c.* 1940–1835			
	Šamšī-Adad *c.* 1808–1775		Hammurabi *c.* 1792–1750
Level Ib *c.* 1832–1700		Yasmah-Addu *c.* 1782–1774	
	Išme-Dagan *c.* 1774–?	Zimrī-Lîm *c.* 1774–1761	

2 The Old Assyrian texts from Kültepe

The first example deals with the so-called private 'archives' belonging to Assyrian merchants found at the site of Kültepe, in Central Anatolia, near the modern city of Kayseri.[8] Merchants from Aššur, on the Tigris in northern Iraq, established long-distance trade with Central Anatolia and settled there in about forty localities during the late twentieth and early nineteenth centuries BCE. Kaneš, located at Kültepe and a thousand kilometres away from Aššur, was at the centre of this trade network. The site was explored several times in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries CE before being excavated continuously from 1948 by a Turkish archaeological team.[9] Kültepe is divided in two main areas, the mound, where the local palace and temples were built, and the lower town, located on the north-east of the mound, where the Assyrian merchants were living mixed with the local inhabitants. Up to now, the excavations on the mound have yielded only forty cuneiform clay tablets, while in the lower town, no less than 22,700 tablets have been unearthed.[10] More than 22,000 of these tablets date to the first half of the nineteenth century BCE and were found in houses inhabited predominantly by Assyrians. Each of these houses yielded

8 Larsen 2015 offers a general presentation of this period.
9 Özgüç 2003; Kulakoğlu and Kangal 2010.
10 Michel 2003 and Michel 2021b for an up to date inventory of the Old Assyrian tablets.

from a dozen to more than a thousand tablets. The remaining six or seven hundred tablets date to the eighteenth century BCE. Kültepe tablets represent the earliest written attestation of the Assyrian language and are, thus, referred to as Old Assyrian texts.

Fig. 2: Tablets found *in situ* in the house of Šalim-Aššur excavated in 1994 in the lower town of Kültepe, ancient Kaneš. © Kültepe Archaeological Archives.

Given that the Old Assyrian levels of Aššur have not been excavated because they are located underneath the monumental buildings of the first millennium Assyrian capital, only twenty-four discarded tablets and thirty royal inscriptions have been recovered there.[11] Thus, the tablets, envelopes and fragments discovered at Kültepe provide a very partial and one-sided view of the history of the Old Assyrian trade and its actors. They offer *flashes* of the organisation of the

11 Michel 2003, 121–123.

trade, society and daily life of Kaneš inhabitants and, indirectly, of Aššur inhabitants.

Gojko Barjamovic, Thomas Hertel and Mogens Larsen published a major study in 2012 based mainly on the Kültepe texts, including dates, to propose a reconstructed social and economic history of the Old Assyrian period.[12] Their analysis, based on statistical and prosopographical data, centres on the distribution of '1250 dated events recorded in c. 1150 individual texts'.[13] The resulting graph[14] would indicate that the Old Assyrian texts stem from a short span of time of thirty years:

> The graph shows that both the rise and the fall are so steep that we need to find new ways to describe and explain the development of the Old Assyrian community at Kanesh.[15]

Among the several possibilities to explain the 'abrupt increase' of the records around *c*. 1893, the authors suggest the following:

> A commercial system based on venture trade and relatively brief visits (two or three years) to Central Anatolia (...) was becoming replaced by a pattern of long-term partnerships with semi-permanent agents living abroad for many years at a time.[16]

The authors explain the 'sharp decline' of 'dated text' around 1865,[17] thirty years before the destruction of many houses by fire, by an 'economic recession', which would have happened after the death of the most prominent merchants.[18]

This study is based on the assumption that we have a sufficiently complete and continuous corpus of texts for the period considered – the archaeological Level II of the lower city of Kaneš, i.e. nineteenth century BCE – to carry out a statistical analysis. Each Kültepe 'archive' corresponds to tablets found in one house and belonging to individuals who lived there during a limited period of their lives, often related by family links, eventually over two or three generations.[19]

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12 Barjamovic, Hertel and Larsen 2012.

13 Barjamovic, Hertel and Larsen 2012, 55.

14 Barjamovic, Hertel and Larsen 2012, 56.

15 Barjamovic, Hertel and Larsen 2012, 58.

16 Barjamovic, Hertel and Larsen 2012, 62.

17 The selected corpus included in the graph of Barjamovic, Hertel and Larsen 2012, 56, fig. 14, does not correspond to *dated texts* but texts mentioning a date.

18 Barjamovic, Hertel and Larsen 2012, 69–70.

19 For Old Assyrian archives, see Michel 1998; Michel 2018; Veenhof 2003; Veenhof 2013; Larsen 2008.

Each of the Kültepe 'archives' comprises an average of 40% or more of letters sent from Aššur or the other Old Assyrian settlements in Anatolia; a total of some 9,000 letters have been unearthed at Kültepe. Letters very rarely include dates; when they do so, the date usually concerns a past event and not the time the letter was written. Thus, the chronological organisation of letters is only possible when they evoke the same business and eventually provide a follow-up.

Legal texts form the second important group of tablets found within houses. These include commercial and family contracts, on the one hand, and legal texts, on the other hand. A few of the latter may include a date referring to a past event. Loan contracts are the most numerous legal texts; they regularly consist of commercial loans which can run over more than a year. In many cases, loans include a date with a year name. The legal validity of the loans was provided by their clay envelope on which the text was copied and which was sealed by the debtor and the witnesses. Once the debt was repaid, the tablet was given back to the debtor who eventually 'killed' it, discarding it or breaking the envelope, thus, cancelling the legal validity of the contract; therefore, loans should have a limited validity. Loan contracts are regularly found in the house of the creditor, and more rarely in the house of one of the witnesses.

Several loans could be listed in long memoranda which were kept for personal accounting; some of these texts could include dates running over more than twenty years. A small number of loans are known both by their contract and memoranda and there are sometimes duplicates of these memoranda, this means that the graph may include two or more texts referring to the same loan.

The graph created by Barjamovic, Hertel and Larsen is based on dates mentioned in 1,150 Old Assyrian texts;[20] this number corresponds to 5% of the total amount of Old Assyrian tablets discovered to date. Loan contracts and memoranda represent no less than 75% of the texts included in the graph, but 15%, at most, of the total of tablets found at Kültepe. Letters mentioning dates represent some 10% of the graph, but letters constitute more than 40% of the Old Assyrian texts. The analysis of texts found in a single house show that they regularly include old letters belonging to past generations: letters are often the oldest texts found in a house.[21] This graph is cer-

20 The graph caption, Barjamovic, Hertel and Larsen 2012, 56, fig. 14, is 'The chronological distribution of Old Assyrian Texts'.

21 Michel 2008 and Michel 2018, 59–60, 64–65 for the archive of Ali-ahum and his son Aššur-taklāku which includes a group of some thirty letters addressed to his father Iddin-Suen. See

tainly instructive and must be analysed as part of the economic development of loan procedures. However, there is an obvious bias in basing the history of the period on such a graph, given the random character and discontinuous nature of the sources at our disposal.

Scholars specialising in the Old Assyrian period have only a tiny fraction of the tablets that remain to be found, not to mention what must have been written by the Assyrian merchants living in Aššur, Kaneš and some forty other towns of Central Anatolia. Only nine hectares of the lower town have been excavated in Kültepe itself, but recent soundings suggest that the lower town extended all around the tell.[22] Several Assyrian merchants owned houses in both Aššur and Kaneš, and sometimes also in other Anatolian towns where they could have left tablets as well.[23]

Moreover, we do not know whether all the texts found in a house were voluntarily preserved and filed there or if some of them were discarded and left there. Texts themselves regularly allude to the extraction of tablets from an 'archive' and the transfer of some tablet containers between two houses or two towns, and when moving to another town, it is probable that individuals would bring with them their most important tablets. Each individual 'archive' found at Kültepe is inherently incomplete.

The Kültepe tablets document certain individuals and some of their activities in an ad hoc manner. When studying the texts found in a house, many questions need to be addressed, such as: Why do we have *these* texts? Do we have all texts that were kept by the inhabitants of a house? How did they sort their texts? What do we lack?

3 The Kingdom of Šamšī-Adad

Discovery of early second millennium BCE archives from ancient Mari and later contemporary smaller archives at sites such as Chagar Bazar, Tell Bi'a and Tell Shemshara combine to illuminate, among many other things, the

also Larsen 2010, 6, which includes two letters sent to Issu-arik the grand-father (texts nos. 2–3) who was presumably active during the years 1935–1890.

22 Kulakoğlu 2010, 45.

23 This is, for example, the case with Šalim-Aššur, who had a house in Durhumit, where he died and was buried (Larsen 2010, 26), or Ali-ahum, who shared his time between Aššur, Kaneš and Burušhattum, where he must have left some of his letters, legal texts and personal accounts (Michel 2018, 59).

'kingdom of Upper Mesopotamia' ruled by Šamšī-Adad, and virtually unknown from other sources (Fig. 3).[24] This short-lived kingdom at its maximum extent spanned an area more or less equivalent to that briefly occupied by the infamous 'Islamic State' a few years ago (2014–2017), a not entirely coincidental parallel, which, however, we shall not pursue further here. What is important in this context is to examine the origin and composition of the sources available, and we may begin with Mari, which has produced the major evidence by far.

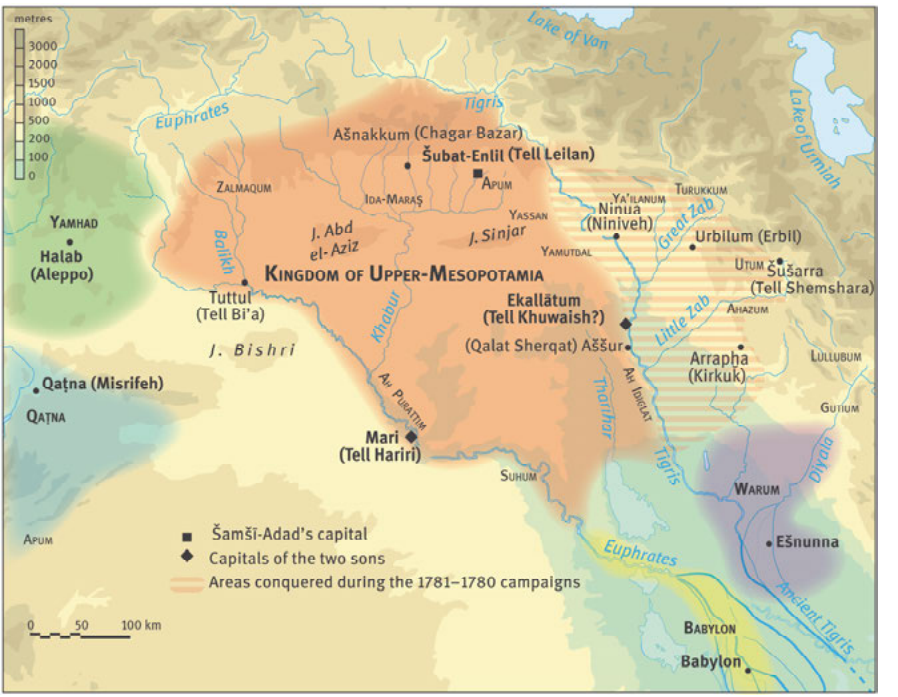

Fig. 3: Map of Upper Mesopotamia with the sites mentioned in text. Map: Jesper Eidem, Cécile Michel and Martin Sauvage, after Sauvage 2020, 81.

24 For a fresh overview in English of this period and the relevant sources, see Arkhipov 2022. The reign of Šamšī-Adad is mentioned in the *Assyrian King List* and a few official inscriptions from Aššur and Nineveh, but apart from this formal information, there are only a very few references to Šamšī-Adad or his kingdom outside the sources discussed here (Arkhipov 2022, 320–327).

Mari (modern Tell Hariri) was an important capital for centuries, situated on the Middle Euphrates in Syria, but Zimrī-Lîm, its last king, was defeated by Hammurabi of Babylon and Mari destroyed *c*. 1760 BCE. When French archaeologists excavated the royal palace of Mari in the 1930s, they found groups of cuneiform tablets in various rooms of the complex, but the main find was made in a small room (no. 115) flanking the inner court. There were thousands of tablets here, principally the diplomatic and political correspondence of the King Zimrī-Lîm, but also a large group of letters dating to the time of his predecessor, Yasmah-Addu, a son of Šamšī-Adad placed as a 'junior' king in Mari. Seven small labels written by officials of Hammurabi and once probably attached to wickerwork boxes where the tablets had been stored were found together with the tablets. Six of the labels refer to 'tablets of servants of Zimrī-Lîm' and the last to 'tablets of the servants of Šamšī-Adad'.[25] This latter group famously include many letters sent by Šamšī-Adad himself to his son Yasmah-Addu. They also include letters sent from Išme-Dagan, another son of the king who was in control of the eastern part of the kingdom, and many letters sent by officials and other associates of Yasmah-Addu.

The situation in room 115 shows that Hammurabi officials, after the conquest of Mari, probably sorted through the tablet groups available left in the palace, and gathered the main state correspondence in boxes in room 115. Furthermore, an overview of the tablets still remaining indicates that groups of important documents are missing, such as most of the letters one would have expected Hammurabi himself to have sent to Zimrī-Lîm while they were still allies. Such documents were presumably removed by Hammurabi's officials and taken to Babylon.

We clearly already face a complicated situation at this level, but there is more. Scattered in various rooms of the Mari palace were thousands of administrative documents from the fourteen year reign of Zimrī-Lîm, some found where they had been used and/or stored, but similar documents from the former reign were predominantly found as fill-in benches and other secondary contexts, and fittingly described as 'dead archives'[26]. Thus, the site of Mari provides us with examples of three main categories of surviving/available textual evidence.

– 'dead' archives – discarded in antiquity – and in many cases lost;
– 'inactive' archives – kept for potential reference in antiquity – for any number of ad hoc reasons; and
– 'living' archives – left *in situ* by destruction and/or abandonment.

25 Charpin 1995 and Charpin 2019, 14–15.
26 Charpin 2012.

Considering how these categories apply to the evidence for the reign of Šamšī-Adad, we can note, firstly, that other contemporary groups of texts were found elsewhere in Mari, such as in the smaller 'oriental' palace,[27] and, no doubt, unexcavated portions of the very large site may still hide further evidence. This is, of course, a situation which applies generally. The early part of Šamšī-Adad's long reign (*c*. 1830–1775 BCE) is still poorly known, but he initially established himself in the city of Ekallātum, a site located somewhere north of Aššur.[28] Later, he left the son Išme-Dagan in charge there, and himself moved to the new capital of Šubat-Enlil, ancient Šehna, modern Tell Leilan in the Upper Habur Basin, while Yasmah-Addu was placed in Mari to the south-west. Ekallātum has not yet delivered any evidence and, as we shall see, major text groups from this period have not surfaced at Tell Leilan. This means that regarding the state correspondence of the kingdom, virtually only the segment from Mari is available, and however spectacular that may be, we would certainly also like to have, for instance, some of the letters Šamšī-Adad sent to Išme-Dagan, not to mention the letters Šamšī-Adad would have received from both sons and other important contemporary figures. New excavations may, of course, remedy this situation, but any optimism in this regard must clearly be tempered with caution. Events at the relevant sites post Šamšī-Adad may well have turned most of the sources desired into 'dead' or, at least, 'inactive' archives.

Estimating the original output of cuneiform tablets in any particular context is complicated at best, but we must assume that a large number of documents, especially of administrative content, were discarded at more or less regular intervals. The levigated clay was sometimes recycled,[29] or the tablets were simply dumped into garbage pits or fill used for construction purposes. Some of the earlier administrative documents found at Mari provide a good example of the latter practice. This is hardly surprising, but what of the substantial group of letters from the time of Yasmah-Addu found in room 115 at Mari? The curious fact about these letters is that they were kept in the Mari palace many years after the demise of the Šamšī-Adad kingdom, and were still there when Hammurabi of Babylon conquered and destroyed Mari. Why did Yasmah-Addu's successor and rival keep all these documents? No adequate explanation has been provided yet for this 'inactive' archive.[30] Purely historical interest is hardly the answer,

27 Charpin 1985

28 Ziegler 2002, and more recently the site of Tell Ḥuwaish, *c*. 18 km north of Aššur was suggested as ancient Ekallātum, see Ziegler and Otto 2022.

29 Taylor and Cartwright 2011.

30 See e.g. Finet 1986.

and the best theory is that the documents were left basically because of a hesitance to discard them. Some of the subject matter in them was still relevant and so they survived, probably fairly undisturbed and un-consulted, until the Mari palace was destroyed.[31] A fairly unusual situation and clearly very lucky for us. Of course, we would have liked to have known where in the palace they were kept before being boxed in room 115, and whether Hammurabi's officials also picked specimens from this group to carry off to Babylon.

As mentioned previously, smaller subsidiary archives from the same period have been excavated at other sites in Upper Mesopotamia. The more notable finds come from the provincial centres of Chagar Bazar (ancient Ašnakkum) and Tell Bi'a (ancient Tuttul) in north-eastern Syria, and include series of administration notes dating to the latter part of Šamšī-Adad's reign. Especially the extensive text groups from Chagar Bazar provide extremely interesting information on the internal organisation of the kingdom, but most of the tablets were apparently discarded, 'dead' archives.[32] The correspondence received by the local governor from other main actors in the kingdom, if still preserved, has not yet been located.

Moving to the capital of the Šamšī-Adad kingdom, ancient Šubat-Enlil (*alias* Tell Leilan), excavated 1979–2010 by a Yale University team, very few documents from the time of the famous king have yet been found.[33] This largely reflects deliberate research strategies of the project, which, after an initial focus on the early second millennium levels, concentrated on earlier occupations. The former efforts, however, produced two large groups of tablets, both dated to the period after Šamšī-Adad. The latest and largest of these group, excavated in the so-called 'Lower Town Palace East' in 1985 and 1987, is a composite group of documents from the reigns of two successive local kings a generation or so after Šamšī-Adad. Interestingly it represents a small-scale parallel to the large 'archive' found in room 115 of the Mari palace: a smaller group of letters from the early king, and a much larger one from his successor. In this case, however, the whole group, *minus* selected pieces, seems to have been set aside as an 'inactive' archive by the next, third king. Eventually, it was probably dumped into rooms of the palace where it was found, mixed with fill used in a reconstruction project.[34]

31 Eidem 2004.

32 Lacambre 2010.

33 For an overview of the epigraphic finds from Tell Leilan of the second millennium BCE, see Eidem 2012.

34 Eidem 2017.

Finally, in the far eastern corner of the kingdom, at Tell Shemshara, located on the Rania Plain in what is now the Kurdish Autonomous Region of Iraq, Danish and Iraqi archaeologists in the 1950s retrieved small, but very informative archives belonging to one of Šamšī-Adad's vassals, a local nobleman by the name of Kuwari. His own archive of letters was found by the Danish team in a room of his palace, which was destroyed by fire in a rebellion *c*. 1780 BCE. It reveals an exciting story of how Kuwari, originally posted as governor by a local kingdom in the Zagros mountains, was obliged to become a vassal of the mighty Šamšī-Adad.[35] The letters sent to Kuwari from Šamšī-Adad himself, his son Išme-Dagan, and various of their officials, thus, come from what was a 'living' archive, frozen in time by an act of war – while Šamšī-Adad was still alive.[36]

Fig. 4: The Danish camp at Tell Shemshara, 1957. Second figure from left: the field director Harald Ingholt (photo Jørgen Læssøe).

35 Eidem and Læssøe 2001.

36 In this sense, the small archive from Shemshara is still unique. One reason is certainly that the site apparently saw little subsequent occupation in contrast to, for example, Mari, but other 'living' archives from this period are no doubt preserved and may be retrieved one day.

Therefore, the kingdom of Šamšī-Adad, a fleeting but important early state formation in Upper Mesopotamia, and, in some measure, a catalyst for the later Assyrian empire, is, as yet, best revealed to us by two rather fortuitous events. The most important is certainly the decision made in ancient Mari, for whatever exact reason or whim, to not discard a large portion of Yasmah-Addu's correspondence. The second was an intuitive decision made by the field director at Tell Shemshara in 1957 to excavate exactly the spot where the main palace archive was buried – before the site was flooded.[37] Without these events, extant evidence would today be limited to series of administrative notes providing only a spare chronological and formal framework. Instead we have a very rich, nuanced and sometimes very intimate impression of at least the later history of the kingdom of Šamšī-Adad,[38] but one heavily influenced by fortunes of preservation and discovery, and still very much an open file.

4 Conclusions

The two examples briefly outlined above reflect the primary expertise of the authors, and it is important to note that the relevant evidence can no doubt be counted as some of the more privileged available from the extant record of cuneiform data. In spite of the abundance of preserved manuscripts, ancient Mesopotamia remained fundamentally semi-literate, writing and reading being practiced mostly within narrow circles of bureaucrats and scholarly scribes. The early second millennium BCE, to which our examples belong, was exceptionally a period of more extensive literacy. Many merchants and mid- to high-level officials were clearly able to read and write, and numerous letters provide lively and engaging information. Even this fortunate situation, however, remains challenging due to the uneven and sometimes inexplicable distribution of the evidence. The bulk of the Old Assyrian tablets from ancient Kaneš containing dates, for instance, seems to belong squarely within a *c*. thirty-year period, a generation or so before the destruction of Level II, but does this, as suggested, reflect a particularly affluent period of the trade, or could it be a mere coincidence? Older tablets were regularly discarded, and this might account for the assumed low-intensity activity in the initial phase of Level II, while, on the other hand, the latest tablets could have been evacuated before the final destruc-

37 Eidem 2020.

38 Charpin and Ziegler 2003, 75–168.

tion. Hopefully the publication and retrieval of further evidence may serve to reach firmer conclusions and, meanwhile, we are also left to speculate to what extent additional textual finds may provide us with new and perhaps surprising perspectives on the 'kingdom of Upper Mesopotamia', a fascinating chapter of Mesopotamian history, illuminated by apparently rich but very circumscribed sources.

In the end, there is no predictable system to which tablets may be preserved and become available. The reality which faces historians of the ancient Near East, therefore, is a lack of archival completeness and continuity – and, not least, more summaries which might provide a secure framework for the casually preserved segments. Documents in any archaeological context usually represent only selected or deselected portions of the original contextual scribal output. We are, of course, all aware of this, but may still be tempted to portray our evidence as more representative of the ancient reality than it actually is. There is no ultimate solution to this challenge, which we believe will basically remain as more millions of tablets eventually appear. Scholars must still be detectives of the past. They must carefully consider the origin and composition of very casual or incidental evidence, and only then use it for judicious reconstructions, which, in the end, can only be tentative. The immediate enthusiasm and joy elicited by a new tablet find, entirely appropriate, is usually tempered by its relative isolation and all the cold tracks which it opens up. This is at once an exciting but also frustrating situation, relatively unique in relation to other fields of ancient history, where the appearance of major new textual sources is rare. The history of the ancient Near East, viewed through the lenses of the extant cuneiform record, may be likened to a multiple award-winning motion picture of which only randomly dispersed segments representing a few percent of the original version are preserved.

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