WHAT’S NEW IN TOWN?

AAGE WESTENHOLZ

University of Copenhagen

The following is an attempt at a survey of the vast increase in our Early Dynastic and Sargonic cuneiform documentation that has been one of the results of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq. There has been quite a controversy over these “illicit” tablets, which it would not be proper to discuss in an article dedicated to the Curator of the Babylonian Section of a large Western museum. Suffice it here to say that there can be no such thing as an illicit tablet, only illicit methods of procuring and trading it—after all, the Sumerians could hardly have known that they were writing illicit tablets—and they are part and parcel of humanity’s cultural heritage and collective memory.

The texts under consideration here date from the Fara period, i.e., ED IIIa, to Late Sargonic. Obviously, also other periods are represented among these new texts; above all, there is a huge body of Old Babylonian tablets, with lesser numbers of Ur III and Neo-Babylonian texts. A most interesting group is the Uruk III tablets that appear to have been found at Zabala. But since I haven’t studied those materials at all, I shall concentrate on the ED and Sargonic periods.

These tablets appeared on the market in ever increasing numbers ever since the First Gulf War in 1991. Since accredited museums as a rule would not purchase them, they were sold to a host of private collectors throughout the world. Some of these collectors have been very enlightened and forthcoming in assisting to make their collections, large and small, known to the scholarly world and eventually published. The trade appears now to have all but stopped, at least in the West, so it is time to take stock.
1. The Collections

The major collections known to me are the following:

1. The Schøyen Collection in Spikkestad, Norway, siglum MS. This includes about 550 texts from the time span in question here, mostly of administrative contents, but also votive inscriptions, literary and lexical texts, school tablets, etc. are represented. They have been entrusted to various scholars, including P. Steinkeller (the ‘historical’ texts), M. Civil (lexical texts), I. Finkel (incantations), and myself (the administrative documents).

2. The Cornell University Collection in Ithaca, N.Y., siglum CUNES. This is by far the largest collection, with close to 2500 Early Dynastic and Sargonic tablets, almost all administrative documents. They too come from various sites in Southern Mesopotamia and fall in all periods between ED IIIa and Late Sargonic. They are still in the process of being baked and cleaned. The chief editor, David I. Owen, is very concerned that the entire collection gets published as soon as possible, and several volumes have been published already or are near to being published.

3. The Lippmann Collection in the Real Academia de Historia, University of Madrid, siglum RAH. This collection contains 337 tablets, all of administrative contents, all from Adab, and mostly of the Middle Sargonic period. Their editor, Manuel Molina, has worked extensively on their publication together with Elena Milone, but they have not yet appeared.

4. The Banca d’Italia collection in Rome, siglum BI. This collection consists of 326 tablets, all published.

5. The Louise Michail collection, a private collection in Milano, siglum L.M. It contains 35 tablets from the period relevant here, 32 of which were inadequately published. A complete re-edition of these texts, including the three unpublished ones, is in preparation.

---

1 See Milone in TCABI 2006: 66–67. The entire collection is known to me from photographs and transliterations kindly supplied by M. Molina.
2 Pomponio et al., TCABI and TCVP 2006. See also the detailed review in Schrakamp 2008.
3 Pettinato 1997 1–9, 12–19, 21–35. This publication contains a surprising number of misreadings and other errors; and the photographs, though luxurious, are often insufficient to establish a reliable reading.