

Yale OFFICE OF THE PROVOST

From: Provost Ben Polak
To: Yale Community
Re: Yale Babylonian Collection
Date: May 12, 2017

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Dear Colleagues,

Since its founding more than a century ago, the Yale Babylonian Collection (YBC) has been a stand-alone collection, physically located in Sterling Memorial Library since 1930, and reporting directly to the Office of the Provost. In the fall of 2016, I appointed an advisory committee for the YBC* comprised of representatives of Yale's extensive cultural heritage community, interested faculty, and staff of the YBC. The committee was charged with making recommendations concerning the overall stewardship of the collection, including conservation, discovery and access.

Committee- and individually-authored reports, as well as extensive conversations, have led me to a series of decisions which I believe will improve the overall stewardship, will share more broadly the holdings of the collection, and will enhance opportunities for teaching and research with this extraordinary collection. Since there has been a great deal of misinformation and unfounded claims circulating in advance of any decision on the future of the YBC, it is important to document and publicly share these decisions here.

Brief Background of Yale Babylonian Collection:

In 1910, J. Pierpont Morgan endowed the William M. Laffan Professorship in Assyriology and Babylonian Literature. The inaugural Laffan Professor, Albert T. Clay, acquired the first tablets and by 1915 the collection numbered 8,000. In 1921, the 2,500 tablets of J. Pierpont Morgan Library were deposited at Yale, and later purchased by Yale in 1972-73. Today the YBC consists of approximately 42,000 inscribed tablets, bricks, and other objects, as well as cylinder and stamp seals, figurines, clay models, game boards, ceramic and stone vessels and fragments, weapons, jewelry, astrolabes, and gems. It is the largest collection of textual material from ancient Mesopotamia in North America and ranks among the leading collections in the world.

The YBC is housed on the third floor of Sterling Memorial Library. When Sterling was built, rooms 322-327 were specifically designed for the YBC, with specially reinforced floors to bear the weight of the collections in the tablet room. The YBC has expanded beyond the original rooms to include a tablet/collections room, a classroom, a reference library, three workrooms, a curatorial office, and a room primarily used for collection conservation, scanning and photography.

The YBC is used by Yale scholars, visiting scholars, and students. In 2016, more than 30 scholars requested over 4,000 tablets and seals for study. Eight graduate and undergraduate level courses and seminars were taught in the YBC classroom – most of the classes taught with objects. In addition, there were 52 loan requests by museums.

Decisions Regarding the Future of the YBC:

With the express goals of improving stewardship of the YBC and increasing the collection's discovery and use, I have decided upon the following

- For the foreseeable future, the YBC will remain in its current location in Sterling Memorial Library where the co-location of the collection, classroom and research library provides an optimal teaching and research environment.
 - The YBC facilities will be improved through the installation of better environmental control units and space renovations; these are forecast to occur in 2018.
- The YBC will gain formal affiliation with one of Yale's large cultural heritage units. As a stand-alone unit, the YBC lacked the support network that the museums and library have, including vast expertise (e.g., conservation, storage, security), services (e.g., registrar, digitization, web design), and infrastructure (e.g., collection management system, digital asset management system). While the YBC staff have done an admirable job of stewarding this exceptionally rare and unique collection, Yale's stewardship obligations warrant greater access to the cultural heritage infrastructure of Yale. Consequently, the YBC is now a collection of the Peabody Museum, as follows:
 - The YBC will remain a distinct collection, with its name intact, in the Peabody's Division of Anthropology. (Yale's Egyptology collection also resides within this division of the Peabody.)
 - Dr. Agnete Lassen will continue her role as the full-time associate curator of the YBC.
 - Additional scholarly affiliations with the collection will fall under the purview and practices of the Peabody.
 - An exhibition at the Peabody featuring the YBC is being planned with an opening during 2018.
 - Yale University Library will continue its current support of the book and archival collections of the YBC.
- A full electronic catalog of inscribed objects in the YBC collection totaling 37,800 items was completed in September 2016. Currently, the catalog lives in a FileMaker Pro database, which is accessible only from a desktop computer in the YBC. To improve global discovery of the collection:
 - The complete collection database will be added to the Peabody's EMu collection management system (<http://collections.peabody.yale.edu/search/>)
 - The complete collection database will be added to the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI) database (<http://cdli.ucla.edu>)
 - Enhancements will be made to the YBC website to improve its function as a discovery point to the collection (<http://babylonian-collection.yale.edu/>)

- The YBC publication series will continue, with a plan to broaden the editorial team and a focus on making the publications more widely available through digital publication and other means.
- While the textual descriptions of the collection are very important, digital scans of the collection are needed as well. The digital images will serve several functions: provide a visual inventory of the collection; document the current condition of each tablet; improve the ability of scholars to determine what is in the collection, thereby reducing the level at which the YBC staff must act as mediators; reduce the need for the YBC staff to produce digital images for scholars upon request; and, in some cases, reduce the need for the collection to be handled when questions can be answered by viewing the digital images. When available, the digital images will be globally accessible through:
 - Peabody's EMu system (<http://collections.peabody.yale.edu/search/>)
 - Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI) database (<http://cdli.ucla.edu>)
 - An enhanced YBC website (<http://babylonian-collection.yale.edu/>)
- Digital access to the collection will not diminish the current levels of physical access to the collection in Sterling Memorial Library. The experience of other Yale collections is that digitization of holdings results in increased, rather than decreased, visits to the physical collections.
- A 1-year conservation fellow will be hired to assist in the creation of a conservation plan for the YBC. The work of the fellow will be overseen by Catherine Sease (Senior Conservator, Peabody), with the assistance of conservation colleagues at Yale's Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage.

The Yale Babylonian Collection is a wonderful asset to Yale and a critical resource to the global community of Assyriologists. The coming changes to the Collection's oversight and stewardship will only enhance its use and appreciation while safeguarding the condition of the tablets and other objects for use by future generations.

Sincerely,

Ben Polak

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Provost

William C. Brainard Professor of Economics

**Members of the Advisory Committee for the Babylonian Collection:*

Benjamin Foster, Babylonian Collection and Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations

Eckart Frahm, Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations

Susan Gibbons, University Library and Provost Office (chair)

Christina Kraus, Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations and Classics

Larry Kanter, Yale University Art Gallery

Agnete Lassen, Babylonian Collection and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations

Ian McClure, Yale University Art Gallery

Mary Miller, Institute for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage and History of Art

David Skelly, Peabody Museum of Natural History and School of Forestry and
Environmental Studies

Allen Townsend, University Library