

# CUNEIFORM ARCHIVES AND LIBRARIES

Papers read at the  
30<sup>e</sup> Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale  
Leiden, 4-8 July 1983

edited by

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TE ISTANBUL  
1986

## ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE KUYUNJIK ARCHIVES

JULIAN READE (London)

This is a provisional report on research into the archaeological provenance of the tablets and other inscribed objects listed in the catalogues of Bezold (1889-99), King (1914), and Lambert and Millard (1968). The sources I have used are not primarily the ancient texts themselves, but modern archival records of various kinds; some of these are unpublished. Ultimately the content of the different Nineveh archives will be established, as far as possible, by systematic philological publication and analysis. In the mean time some progress is possible<sup>1</sup>.

It is well known that, although the K of the "K Collection" has to stand for Kuyunjik, name of the main mound at Nineveh (fig. 1), many tablets bearing K numbers were not in fact found there. There are several explanations for this. Sometimes tablets from different Assyrian sites may have been mixed together before reaching London. Sometimes K numbers were applied to inscribed objects regardless of provenance. And sometimes, it seems, pieces of inscribed clay acquired by the British Museum before about 1860 were stored and confused with the numerous Assyrian tablets which, though excavated in the 1850s, remained unnumbered until the 1870s or later; then they all got K numbers together, regardless of provenance. Only the numbers K 1-278 (with a few exceptions caused by subsequent renumbering) were allocated in the 1850s; we can be sure that the great majority of tablets bearing these low numbers were found during Layard's 1851 excavations in the South-West Palace at Kuyunjik, notably in the area of Rooms XL and XLI<sup>2</sup>. Items with higher K numbers may derive from the South-West Palace, or the North Palace, or elsewhere. Occasionally, with Assyrian tablets numbered in other ways, we have better information. For instance, the group numbered 48-11-4 (which signifies official receipt into the British Museum collections on 4 November 1848) includes one Middle Assyrian piece (280) whose provenance is given by Layard as Nimrud (ICC, 79); the letters 48-11-4, 282-3, together with 48-7-20, 116-9, which seem to include some of the latest Assyrian state letters to survive, evidently correspond to the "several small oblong tablets of dark unbaked clay" which were found in 1847 in or close to the throneroom area of the South-West Palace at Kuyunjik<sup>3</sup>. An unpublished report from H. Rassam suggests that most of the 83-1-

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Messrs I. L. Finkel and C. B. F. Walker for advice on various points.

<sup>2</sup> A. H. Layard, *Nineveh and Babylon* (London, 1853) 344-7.

<sup>3</sup> A. H. Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains II* (London, 1849) 124.

18 Niveveh tablets were found in the area of Room LIV in the South-West Palace. Similarly, most of G. Smith's DT group, apart from those bought in Babylonia, came from the North Palace at Nineveh, but most of the S or Sm group from the South-West Palace; yet we can seldom specify, at present, in which of the two palaces a particular piece was found. There is more information of this nature, to be given in a fuller publication elsewhere. The present paper reviews, in general terms, some of the major Nineveh archives.

Our earliest archives, in a sense, come from the late Ubeid, Uruk, and Early Dynastic periods, in the form of seal-impressions and one numerical tablet<sup>4</sup>. As the amount of early deposit excavated at Nineveh is relatively small, these finds suggest that the site was an important one, with administrative structures and archives of some complexity, at various times before the Agade period. It is from the Agade period itself, however, that we have our first inscribed sealing<sup>5</sup>. There are also scraps of commemorative Agade inscriptions on stone (*EAK*, 2), possibly foundation records from the Ishtar Temple complex. A copy of one of these texts will have been available to Shamshi-Adad I who, after an Old Assyrian hiatus, refers in his own foundation record to Manishtushu's work at the site (*EAK*, 9-12). The Ishtar Temple foundations excavated by Thompson, and ascribed by him to Ashur-resh-ishi I<sup>6</sup>, probably belonged to Shamshi-Adad I's building. On or close to one of its original pavements were the remains of an Old Babylonian archive (BM 134533, 134535-9, and possibly BM 134534, 134825); it concerns agricultural matters, and one letter (134536) mentions the important city of Nurrugum.

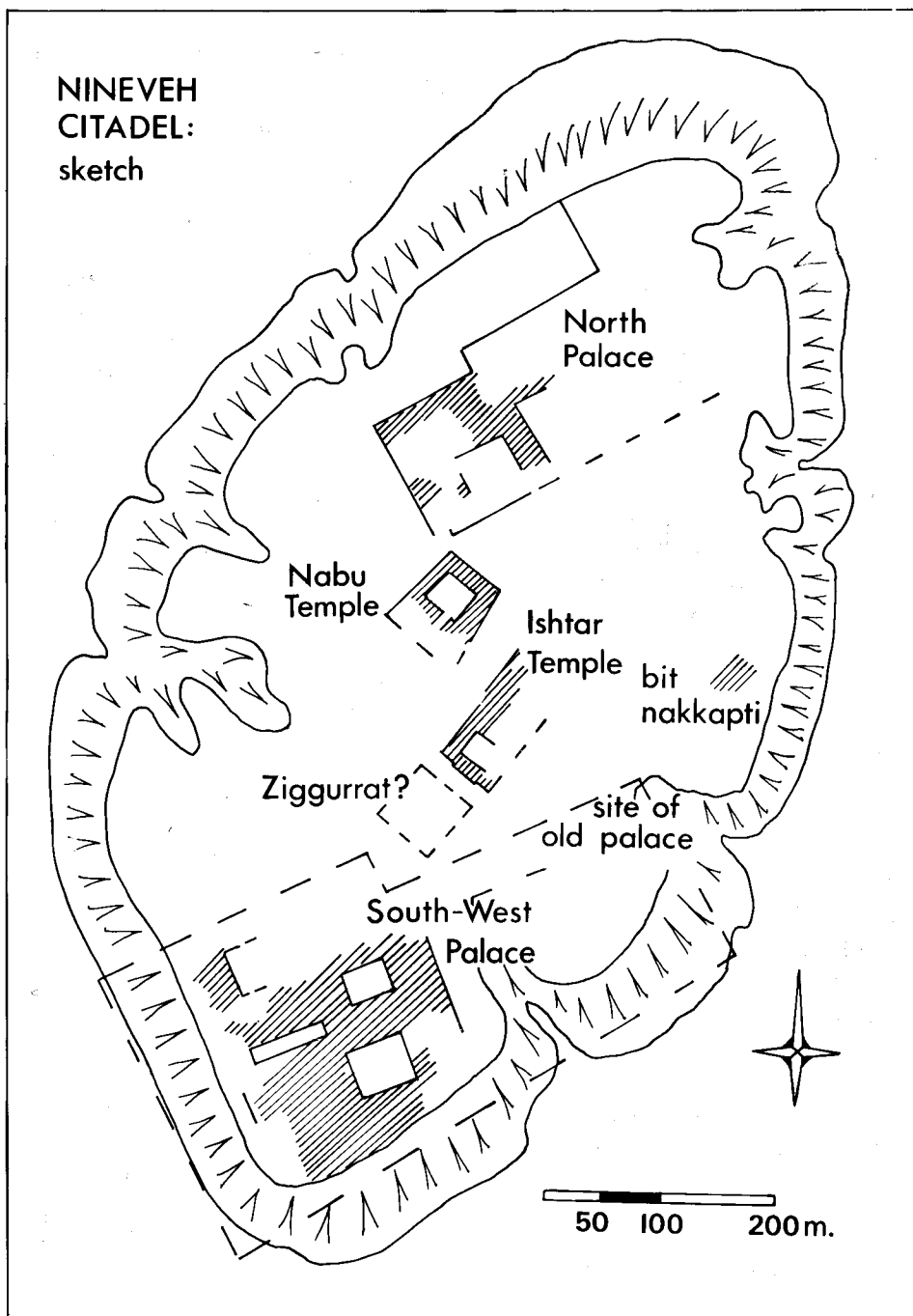
By the reign of Ashur-uballit I (1363-28 BC), if not earlier, Nineveh was in the hands of the kings of Ashur and remained so, in principle, until the fall of the Assyrian empire in 612 BC. This is a period of over seven centuries during which there was, so far as we know, continuous occupation. Public buildings were not infrequently built or restored, and there are therefore many inscribed bricks, foundation documents — notably terracotta tablets, cylinders, and prisms — and architectural fittings of which the wall-knobs and rosettes from the Ishtar Temple, some catalogued as vase or dish fragments (e.g. 56-9-9, 128-199), deserve a mention. Normally these will have been found in the ruins of the buildings for which they were originally designed, and are not really archives.

There are at least two exceptions, however. One is the Nineveh prism of Sargon II, put together from many fragments, some of which were certainly found in the South-West Palace at Nineveh. Tadmor argued that this prism, the text of which refers to a

<sup>4</sup> D. Collon and J. E. Reade, 'Archaic Nineveh', *BagM* 14 (1983) 33-4.

<sup>5</sup> R. C. Thompson and M. E. L. Mallowan, 'The British Museum excavations at Nineveh, 1931-32', *AAA* 20 (1933) pl. LXVI, no. 1.

<sup>6</sup> R. C. Thompson and R. W. Hamilton, 'The British Museum excavations on the Temple of Ishtar at Nineveh, 1930-31', *AAA* 19 (1932) 64-5, pl. XC.



1. Sketch plan of the Citadel of Nineveh with the main buildings.

building at Ashur, was a rough draft<sup>7</sup>. If so, it was probably transferred from Khorsabad to Nineveh with the remainder of Sargon's state archive. The other much more important exception comprises the seventh-century foundation cylinders and prisms listed by Lambert and Millard (1968,92) as coming from the "House of Sennacherib's Son", together with other such pieces whose provenance is not specifically recorded. The "House of Sennacherib's Son" area lies within the walls of Nineveh, a little to the north of Kuyunjik. Thompson, the excavator, refers to about three hundred pieces which were found there, scattered "usually in sporadic patches of rubble about two to three feet below surface" — possibly in fill that had been used to level ground<sup>8</sup>; the Chicago fragments published by Piepkorn<sup>9</sup> probably derived from the same area. The texts range in date from Sennacherib to Ashurbanipal, and were written for several different buildings; it is clear that they were not originally intended to be placed where they were eventually found. This strange archive might be explained as a relic of one of Nineveh's royal scriptoria, as such foundation documents must have been produced in large numbers very fast, for burial at regular and frequent intervals in the brickwork of walls; for instance, the walls of Sennacherib's Nineveh were about 12 km. long, and there must be at least several hundred prisms buried in them. There were pitfalls between the manufacture and deposition of such a document. First, there might be scribal or other errors bad enough to invalidate it (certainly there were occasional difficulties over precise dates<sup>10</sup>: these might not all be recognized before the object was fired in the kiln. Secondly, some must have broken during firing. Thirdly, the content of texts needed periodic updating, to delete old or accommodate new information, a process which may have involved the rejection of existing stock. Furthermore, with mass production, the scribes may have sometimes produced more items than were actually required. So we should expect that, somewhere at Nineveh, there would be a dump of unwanted foundation documents, and it could be that Thompson found material from this. It may be relevant that, among the few tablets from the same area, there is one (BM 134557) which reads like the prologue to an Ashurbanipal prism<sup>11</sup>; it is not a piece of Ashurbanipal "library" calligraphy, however, but looks more like a tablet made for some practical purpose such as copying or dictating from.

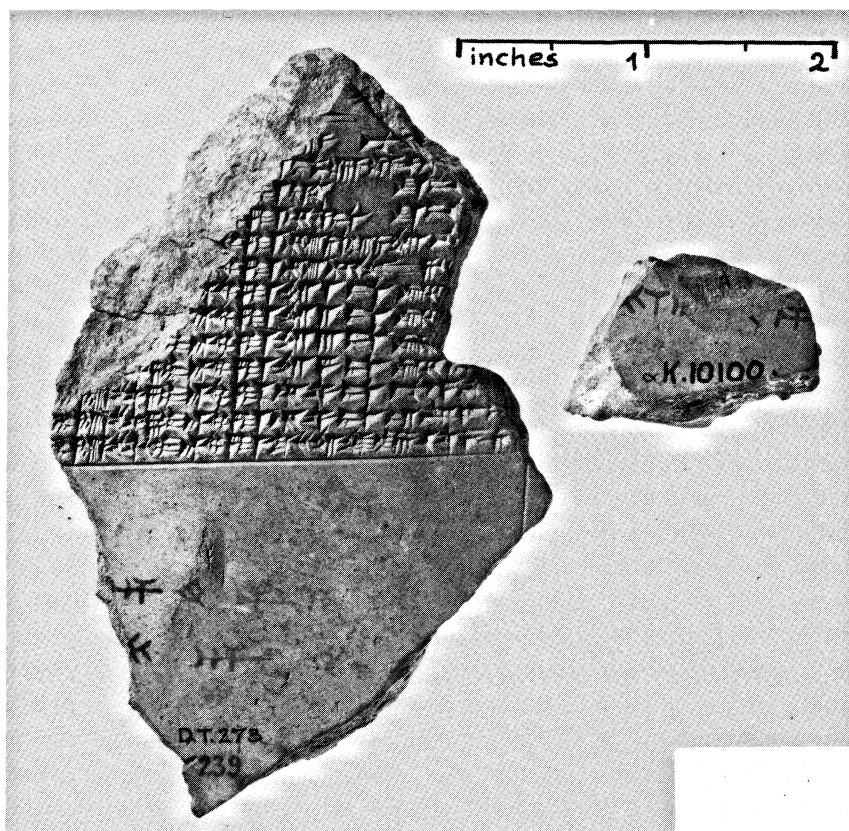
<sup>7</sup> H. Tadmor, 'The campaigns of Sargon II of Assur: a chronological-historical study', *JCS* 12 (1958) 92.

<sup>8</sup> *AAA* 20 (1933) 78. See also R. C. Thompson, 'A selection from the cuneiform historical texts from Nineveh (1927-32)', *Iraq* 7 (1940) 85-6.

<sup>9</sup> A. C. Piepkorn, *Historical Prism Inscriptions of Ashurbanipal I* (AS 5; Chicago, 1933) 3, n. 12.

<sup>10</sup> At least, some dates seem to have been partially erased.

<sup>11</sup> A. R. Millard, 'Fragments of historical texts from Nineveh: Ashurbanipal', *Iraq* 30 (1968) pl. XXV. The copy is more elegant than the original.



2. DT 273 and K 10100, with traces of an Ashurbanipal colophon in ink.

More conventional Nineveh archives, consisting mainly of cuneiform tablets, date in their final form, so far as we know, from the seventh century but may occasionally have incorporated older material. We know of about fifty Nineveh texts, in the British Museum, which may be classed either as Middle Assyrian or, at any rate, as significantly earlier than the seventh century in appearance. One of the most remarkable is the Tukulti-Ninurta epic the major pieces of which (BM 121033), and probably others, were found in the area between the Ishtar and Nabu Temples, where Thompson mistakenly thought there had been a palace of Ashurnasirpal II<sup>12</sup>; he based this conclusion on the large amount of Ashurnasirpal debris which he found there, mainly built into later houses, and which almost certainly derived from the

<sup>12</sup> R.C. Thompson and R.W. Hutchinson, 'The site of the palace of Ashurnasirpal at Nineveh, excavated in 1929-30 on behalf of the British Museum', *AAA* 18 (1931) 79-93, pl. XXXIX.

neighbouring Ishtar Temple. The probability that there was a library in the temple seems high; one may imagine that this was the source from which Ashurbanipal's scribes copied the Ishtar hymn of Ashurnasirpal I (80-7-19, 152 + ). Some other early fragments came from this general area, and probably also from a little to the east, in the vicinity of the old palace and Sennacherib's *bit nakkapti* (in the 1905-4-9 collection). Whether Ashurbanipal's library, however defined, included Middle Assyrian originals remains uncertain. One liver omen text (K 205) could well have been found by Layard in the South-West Palace, and the great god-list (K 4349 + ), put together from many fragments, seems a fair candidate; but we do not really know where they were found or who had owned them. One Middle Assyrian incantation (Rm 376) is in fact recorded as coming from the area of the Kidmuri Temple at Nimrud.

Another library at Nineveh would have been that in the Nabu Temple, a building founded by Adad-nirari III. This site was found in a ruinous state<sup>13</sup>. There are in the British Museum pieces which either derived from it or were destined for it, since they bear Ashurbanipal's specific Nabu Temple colophons (Hunger, 1968, nos. 327-8, 338-9), but only two (BM 121103, 128071) are known to have been found in that vicinity. It might be interesting to investigate whether the same scribes were responsible for both the Nabu Temple and the "Ashurbanipal library" texts.

Most of the Nineveh tablets emerged from the South-West Palace. This was built by Sennacherib as a royal and official residence incorporating government offices, and remained in use long after his death; Ashurbanipal was one king who restored or refurbished part of it. It has sometimes been thought that tablets with Ashurbanipal colophons, if found in the South-West Palace, cannot have belonged there originally, but must have been moved there from Ashurbanipal's own North Palace. In practice, however, the South-West Palace during Ashurbanipal's reign was just as much his property as the North Palace: tablets from either of them, like bricks, might legitimately bear Ashurbanipal palace labels.

In the South-West Palace different categories of tablets were frequently found jumbled together, though we need not imagine that this was how the Assyrians themselves kept them. In any case most of the scholarly "library" texts written in royal scriptoria, together with some other official documents, are or were distinguished from the remainder by their clay. Unbaked, this is a fine red colour; it looks like the dense fossil clay which is exposed in geological strata beside some Assyrian rivers and streams<sup>14</sup>. Since clay tablets naturally turn red on baking, it is sometimes very difficult to decide whether these Kuyunjik pieces were deliberately

<sup>13</sup> R. C. Thompson and R. W. Hutchinson, 'The excavations on the Temple of Nabu at Nineveh', *Archaeologia* 79 (1929) 103-8, pl. LXIII.

<sup>14</sup> J. E. Reade, *Assyrian Sculpture* (London, 1983) 16, fig. 13.



3. K 3353+, with Ashurbanipal colophon added subsequently.

baked or not. Some of them were indeed so effectively baked during the conflagration of 612 BC that the job might as well have been done professionally, but there are others in which one can see a whole range of colours and densities, from a relatively soft red to the hard green of vitrification. On the whole it seems likely that the "library" texts, unlike many of the Middle Assyrian ones and of course all the foundation documents, were not baked originally. The same applies to the royal letters, many state documents, and the private archives; these generally are made of any one of a wide range of inferior clays, only baked if at all in 612.

While scholarly texts were widely distributed in the South-West Palace, it seems plain that the great mass of them were found on the floor in or near Rooms XL and



XLI, as recorded by Layard<sup>15</sup>, and that subsequent excavators were mainly finding those which Layard's tunnels had missed. G. Smith, who noted many in the nearby corridor XLIX, which was not connected to rooms XL-XLI by a door, thought that they must have been stored on an upper storey, so that different parts of single tablets fell into different areas<sup>16</sup>, but his evidence is inconclusive in view of later disturbance of the site. Rooms XL-XLI had sculptured panels round their walls, but this would not have precluded their use for tablet storage.

On some occasions scholarly texts may have been acquired and copied indiscriminately, but many of them must have been collected for genuine use and reference. For instance, it has been remarked that a high proportion of the Kuyunjik Collection consists of omen texts of one kind or another, and it may be that the proportion would have been less high in a temple library. The interpretation of omens was an important state activity, and it would obviously have been convenient for scholars serving the state to be able to refer to a central comprehensive collection of the relevant literature. Traditionally individual scholars would have had their own reference libraries, and these must be the source of some of the pre-Ashurbanipal scholarly texts from the South-West Palace. With Ashurbanipal, in contrast, a central reference library was deliberately built up. One possibility is that tablets bearing the simplest colophon, with only the king's name and a few titles (Hunger 1968, no. 317), were made or acquired for reference in this way. It is intriguing that two of them (K 10100, DT 273: fig. 2) have the colophon in ink rather than as part of the inscribed text, and even when the colophon is inscribed it is liable to be crudely scratched, or added in what may be a different hand (e.g. K 3353 + : fig. 3). Here they may be a link with the processes of donation or confiscation recently discussed by Parpola (1983).

The South-West Palace also produced a wide range of official documents and private archives, which Parpola and Kwasman are classifying. We can be sure, from their dates of excavation, that many of these were found, not in the area of Rooms XL-XLI but in rooms well to the south. Layard also noted many sealings from Room LXI<sup>17</sup>. Whereas the official documents seem to cover most of the seventh century, the private ones (so far as I have ascertained) belong to archives from the first half of it only. This observation, if substantiated, may relate either to the purpose for which the texts were retained, or to a change in the way in which the building was used. On the other hand, it should be emphasized that the part of the South-West Palace systematically cleared by the excavators was only the sculptured area planned by Layard. The existence of a vast outer courtyard, that must have been surrounded by more government offices and residences, was not recognised in those days; and there must be plenty more tablets awaiting excavation there.

<sup>15</sup> A. H. Layard, *Nineveh and Babylon* (London, 1853) 344-7.

<sup>16</sup> G. Smith, *Assyrian Discoveries* (London, 1875) 144.

<sup>17</sup> A. H. Layard, *Nineveh and Babylon* (London, 1853) 153-4.

The North Palace (so far as we are familiar with it) was built by Ashurbanipal in the late 640s, apparently on the site of another existing royal palace. It has produced at least three distinct types of document. First there is the archive found in 1853 by H. Rassam in Room C. Rassam stated, of these tablets, that "the largest of these, which happened to be in better order, were mostly stamped with seals"<sup>18</sup>, and we can pin down two of them (K 309a and K 329), both of which belong to the otherwise extensive archives of men who were royal officials under Ashurbanipal and later. There is no clear evidence that Rassam found here, as he later believed, the famous Deluge and Creation tablets (K 3375, K 5419c); he may have assumed that, because they were regarded as belonging to Ashurbanipal's library, and he had found Ashurbanipal's palace, therefore he had found them. H. Rawlinson indeed was so unimpressed by Rassam's tablets that in 1854 (4 October, unpublished letter, copy in British Museum) he was urging the next supervisor of the excavations, W.K. Loftus, "the chances are also that somewhere in the North Palace you will light upon the Hall of Records, and if such should be the case, I recommend you to lay on some extra gangs immediately, to disinter the tablets".

Yet, though Rassam may have been mistaken, this palace did produce scholarly texts of great interest. Many probably came from Loftus, the records of whose work are largely lost, but Smith found more in 1873-4, especially at the south corner of the building, and it is through his records, and those of Rassam's 1878-82 expeditions, that we may one day begin to build up a picture of the North Palace library. It is necessary to bear in mind, however, that the south corner of the North Palace is suspiciously close to the Nabu Temple. At this stage I can offer two observations on the scholarly tablets attested as coming from this northern area. One is that the clay of some of them is not the rich red of the bulk of the Kuyunjik tablets of this kind, but a shabby disintegrating light brown, much more like the material of Babylonian tablets. The other is that the colophons, so far as noted, are long ones: I have yet to find an example of the colophon which only gives the royal name and titles. It may be, given Ashurbanipal's literary aspirations, that the North Palace tablets really reflect the kind of literature he thought he should have around him. Alternatively, they were the best or completest sets of tablets in the royal collection. Another possibility is that some of them were those he had copied in his own hand.

There is, so far as I know, just one official letter attested as coming from the North Palace, and single finds are automatically suspect. Nevertheless this is a letter of which Ashurbanipal in person is likely to have seen a copy, for it came from his brother Shamash-shum-ukin (1904-10-9, 42). It was therefore written before Ashurbanipal began work on the North Palace, and could have belonged to an archive of exceptional state letters concerning matters on which the king could not delegate responsibility.

<sup>18</sup> H. Rassam, *Asshur and the Land of Nimrod* (New York, 1897) 31.

Our picture of the various Nineveh archives will always remain an impressionist one; we shall never have the precision of Flemish painting. Much can be done, however. Questions that Parpola has asked of the official documents<sup>19</sup> need to be asked of the scholarly texts too. We should be better able to distinguish the work of individual scribes; to understand the significance of the different types of colophon; to identify, with the help of physical criteria such as size and type of clay besides more traditional techniques, the different sets of tablets, not merely the different series and divergent traditions. These classificatory procedures, besides generating hundreds more "joins", should tell us much more both about sources and about the content of the original archives. Then we may be better equipped to consider what the archives meant to those who compiled them and what more they may contribute to our understanding of the ancient world.

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<sup>19</sup> S. Parpola, 'A note on the Neo-Assyrian census lists', *ZA* 64 (1975) 104, n. 13.