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The tablets housed in the British Museum which form the object of this book are part of a larger corpus of economic tablets from Hellenistic Uruk scattered through museums and institutions in Europe and the United States.

Although the term ‘collection’ is convenient to describe the tablets as a whole, they do not form a proper collection, having been accessioned in different groups by the Museum over almost a century (between the second half of the 19th century and the first of the 20th).

It is clear even at first sight, however, that some physical characteristics of most of the tablets suggest that they belong together: the elegant script, thick edges covered by seal impressions and the reverse’s layout that can be classified into four main format-types are distinctive features of the contracts in the BM collection, as well as of those forming the whole corpus from Hellenistic Uruk, to the point that the few documents that do not lend themselves to this classification can hardly be identified as part of the group.

The sharp ‘visual’ distinction between legal and administrative documents brings to the fore the problem of standardisation. That the content of a tablet correlates to its shape and size is not new to cuneiform studies and, as is clear from chapter 2, this also proves true for the tablets in the BM collection. Specifically, sometimes apparently minor variation in the standard layout and format of the tablets, especially as regards the arrangement of the text blocks on their surface, the script’s alignment and its distribution over single lines, as well as the intentional use of blanks and special markers, reveal a certain degree of ‘creativity’ of the scribes in their effort to find their own way in the fragile balance between tradition and innovation. Their social, geographical and cultural background, as well as their individual preference, is reflected in the choice of specific sub-formats and layouts, which in some cases goes hand in hand with the choice of rare spellings and other particular linguistic features.

The use of the BM collection as a laboratory to test the possibilities offered by the combined analysis of the layout of the tablets and the identity of those who produced them, forms the basis for a systematic investigation of the topic that aims at examining the whole corpus from Hellenistic Uruk with an eye to the reconstruction of the mental habits and the social networks of the scribes that wrote them, in the light of the socio-economic context whence they originate.¹

It has been often underlined in the studies that the corpus of Hellenistic tablets from Uruk does not form an archive *stricto sensu*. This holds true also for the tablets published here: the presence of individuals acting both as buyers and sellers in the documents, as well as the existence of many duplicate tablets, all sealed (thus retaining their own juridical value), clearly speak against this possibility.

The identification of duplicates and the sub-collections they belong to, in addition to the distinction identified among the BM duplicates between an ‘internal’ and ‘external’ type, helps to reconstruct the process leading to their dispersal in the first part of the last century and may eventually help to shed light on how the tablets originally belonged together.

The scenario that emerges from the examination of the BM collection is that of a large number of internal duplicates, many of them with prebends as their object and members of the Ekur-zākir family (especially Lâbâši) as buyers; these tablets were accessioned by the Museum as part of different lots (either excavated by Loftus or acquired in 1913 and 1914). A smaller group, which includes the only extant examples of *mubannûtu* prebend in the whole corpus, was acquired as part of the same lot. The only two pairs of duplicate tablets that concern urban properties unsurprisingly belong to the dossier of the *bīt rittis* property of Anu; they mention an interpreter scribe and a parchment maker and are part of the 1920-6-15 collection. This date-group is also striking in that it consists largely of tablets where individuals bear either Greek or non-Babylonian names in general: it is tempting

¹ This is the topic of a research project that I’m currently carrying on.

to suggest that it assembles tablets that originally belonged to a distinct group, separate from the others. Be that as it may, it seems likely that a similar methodology applied to the systematic study of the duplicates of the whole corpus will offer useful information for understanding the rationale for the tablets being stored together and detecting the mechanisms underlying their production.

The approach adopted in this book was that of exploring the documents of the collection according to the three main thematic sections on which they bear: arable land, urban properties and prebends. The administrative texts have been treated as a group since, given their small number, a thematic subdivision would have not been useful.

Although the examination of family or other specific dossiers was not the prime interest of the investigation, looking at the content of the documents through the lens of the social dimension of the individuals acting in them helped to analyse patterns, to detect strategies, and in general to understand the rationale for the transactions. Thus, although the thematic division of the collection conforms to the general make-up of the corpus from Hellenistic Uruk (with the notable exception of slaves), exploring the types of property with lineage (or its absence), family relationships, professions and sometimes also gender and geography in mind allowed us to highlight the original contribution that the BM tablets bring to the corpus, in addition to new evidence *per se* (such as new types of prebends, new formulae etc.).

Thus, for example, the collection informs us about the occupational patterns of two areas of the city of Uruk, one characterised by arable land, the other by urban properties, that were not well attested before. One is the area of ‘the bank of the moat and the wall of Uruk’, whose landscape is characterised by the presence of fields adjoining the Nār-Damqat canal; the documents confirm the long term occupation of this area by the prebendary gardeners and further suggest that the interest of Lâbâši and other members of his family for the arable land located there is connected to their holding titles in that profession.

The other area is that variously described as ‘the Fortress of Anu, the Village, the Ešgal’ (or a combination of the three). Here the documents in the BM collection show that large unbuilt plots of urban land were allocated by the temple as tenured properties, under the supervision of the *rab ša rēš āli*, to tenants in order for them to exploit the plots as housing. The conditions incumbent on the assignees as a result of this procedure are explicitly stated in the allocation contracts and are probably also reflected in the so-called ‘conditional sales’, i.e. sale contracts, concerning tenured properties that add to the transfer of ownership formula the specification that the property is owned by the new owner in *bīt ritti*-ship.

The area of the Village district is prominently occupied by individuals that do not belong to the traditional families of Uruk; they bear non-Babylonian names (especially North-West Semitic names or Greek names) and are identified by a professional designation. Among them, in addition to the clay workers of the temple are found, for example, interpreter scribes and the parchment maker (a hapax in the sources). These elements as a whole suggest that the area was of somewhat new occupation.

On the other hand, the collection adds to our previous knowledge on shops: besides confirming that these structures enjoyed a special status (they were more valuable than others, bordered public streets, were always next to each other and had a rectangular shape), it offers evidence for a pattern of gender-related ownership. Women appear prominently as the owners of shops: it is not clear why this happened, either in connection to their function or to the fact that they were a preferential item in connection to dowries.

Prebends represent a substantial part of the contracts in the BM, which besides presenting evidence for newly attested titles at the same time offer many new insights into the system and its mechanisms. As for the new titles, for that in the *malītu*-offerings we only know that it was connected to the clothing ceremonies of the gods and the cult in the Ešgal and Rēš temple. As for the *mubannūtu*, the presence of documents relating to this title has proven important not only because it is a hapax, but also because it confirms the existence in this period of two separate titles, one for the builder and one for the arranger of the sacrificial table. It forms the basis for the interpretation of another title, usually translated as cultic attendant (*gerseqqûtu*), whose meaning remained to date somewhat opaque.

The makeup of the BM collection as regards the distribution of prebend-types conforms, as we have seen, to that of the corpus in general. The BM tablets add to the corpus a substantial amount of information on the prebends of the cultic attendant, the exorcist and also of the temple-enterer,

which are the best represented in Uruk, while they provide no information on those of the builder, doorkeeper, oil presser and cultic singer. With the exception of the doorkeeper's prebend, this probably reflects the fact that the collection is largely dominated by documents involving members of the Lâbâši family, who were not interested in the builder's, oil presser's and cultic singer' titles, but played a major role as owners of prebends of the cultic attendant, temple-enterer and exorcist.

The scanty evidence on the brewer's prebend in the collection compared to the corpus also agrees with the fact that Lâbâši and his family are not well represented in this sector. The suspicion that the brewer's prebend represented a minor interest for Lâbâši and his family might arise, since only a limited number of members of this family are known to have owned shares in the title. However, the particular characteristics of the dossier suggest that Lâbâši, who is the first among his family members to hold the title, was a newcomer in the sector. The fact that he probably acted as brewer himself and that the dated documents concerning the brewer's prebend where he is a party belong to the later phase of his documented activity in the prebendary system, might simply indicate that possession of the title was not well consolidated among the earliest generations of the family.

Lâbâši had a stake also in the exorcist's prebend, as the documents in the collection show, adding substantially to the corpus but overall confirming the fact that two main families were involved in this sector, namely those of the Ekur-zâkir and the Gimil-Anu. A third family emerges in one of the documents, that of Rabi-Anu, whose role in this sector is difficult to ascertain since this family name never occurs in Uruk, except in the onomastic chain of a certain Šamaš-êtir/Anu-balâssu-iqbi.

The latest documents in time concerning the title, which follow an undocumented chronological gap, introduce important innovations in the formulary, such as the reference to an extended pantheon and to the existence of an 'estate of Šamaš-êtir/Anu-uballit, that might point in the direction of new forms of monopoly over this prebend (which is, however, still the object of transaction between members of the two Ekur-zâkir and Gimil-Anu families).

Considerable variation characterises the dossier concerning the butcher's prebend. The most important contribution that the collection brings to the knowledge of this title regards the problem of the duplicates. In fact, six out of eight contracts in the BM are pairs of duplicates, and three more pairs are available in the corpus: one wonders whether a specific rule presided over its transmission, as might be implied by the reference to the existence of a duplicate copy of the contract in a document concerning this type of title in the State Hermitage Museum. As for the social dimension of the title, the collection confirms that members of the Ekur-zâkir and Hunzû family owned the title during the first century of the Seleucid Era; after a chronological gap, when sources are again available for the reign of Demetrius, a family of doorkeepers, member of the *kiništu* of the temple, with no clan affiliation, interact with individuals belonging to the traditional families of the city, while the older families that had a stake in the title are no longer attested.

Finally, the collection includes few tablets that can be immediately recognised from the others on account of their anomalous layout, shape and palaeography. As is well known, they represent what remains of the archive of the temple proper, and although their background is not completely clear they shed new light on some of the administrative procedures that kept the temple running smoothly in the Hellenistic period.

To conclude, from the discussion of the tablets housed in the British Museum that are edited in this book, it was possible to extract significant information on the social dimension, lives and activities of the individuals on whose behalf and by whom they were produced: in this perspective, the study of the BM collection forms a significant addition to the already published material from the city of Uruk dated to the Hellenistic period.

