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LEXICAL TEXTS FROM JENA

Stahl Field Report 2014

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In the late nineteenth century Hermann Hilprecht, Professor of Assyriology at the University of Pennsylvania, went to Mesopotamia, then part of the Ottoman Empire, to excavate the city of Nippur. The results of four expeditions (which he directed mostly from a distance) were absolutely stunning – so much so that more than hundred years later we are still in the process of inventorying, reading, and translating the tens of thousands of cuneiform texts and fragments that were found by Hilprecht and his team. The texts range from the late Early Dynastic period (around 2400 BCE) to the Neo-Babylonian period (around 500) and include everything from administrative documents, to letters, literary compositions, and scholarly texts of all kinds.

Hilprecht was a very accomplished Assyriologist; he was interested in the cuneiform tablets, much more than in the architecture or other archaeological remains. And he hit gold. The only site that could be compared to Nippur in terms of numbers of cuneiform tablets was Nineveh, excavated several decades earlier by the English. Hilprecht was hardly an archaeologist by modern standards. Findspots were recorded only in very general terms – and even those notes are often absent, got lost, or refer to objects that can no longer be identified in museum collections.

In the Old Babylonian period (around 1800 BCE) Nippur had been an important center of scholarship and education. The great majority of literary tablets from this period (perhaps 85%) come from Nippur and were found by Hilprecht's team. The number of lexical texts (word lists and sign lists) from the site is no less remarkable. Approximately four thousand such tablets, many of them extracts written by pupils of the scribal school, enable scholars today to reconstruct in considerable detail the sequence of exercises and the way that teaching was conducted.

The finds from Nippur were divided, according to the custom of the times, between the home country and the university that supported the expeditions. The Nippur collections of the Archaeological Museum of Istanbul and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Penn thus contain objects from the same excavations – occasionally fragments of the same tablet are now stored in two (or more!) museums.

The spectacular success of the Nippur expeditions was followed by the success of Hilprecht's publications. Several series of text publications gave scholars all over the world access to numerous texts in genres that had been almost entirely unknown up to that point (for instance Sumerian literary texts). Some of these volumes were written by Hilprecht himself, others by his students and assistants. They are still considered to be of high scholarly value because of the accuracy of the line drawings of cuneiform texts and because of Hilprecht's deep knowledge of the ancient languages (in a period when there were hardly any tools available, such as dictionaries or sign lists).

All of this disintegrated very quickly when Hilprecht got entangled in a controversy with John Punnet Peters, a member of the excavation team, who accused Hilprecht of claiming all the glory of expeditions that he barely visited but directed from the comfort of his study. The so-called Peters – Hilprecht controversy has been extensively documented and will not be discussed here in detail – an important result, however, was Hilprecht's resignation in 1911 and his alienation from the University of Pennsylvania. After his death (1925) it appeared that Hilprecht had a considerable collection of cuneiform tablets and other archaeological objects in his second home in Germany. He willed these objects to the University of Jena in honor of his first wife, laying the groundwork for the Frau Hilprecht Sammlung Babylonischer Altertümer.

The background of Hilprecht's personal collection has never been fully clarified (the University of Jena is presently working on the digitization of Hilprecht's archive, which may throw more light on the matter). It is possible that Hilprecht simply kept some interesting pieces at home. Hilprecht himself maintained that Hamdi Bey, the curator of the Istanbul museum (and a prominent intellectual of the time) gave him a number of objects as in personal possession out of gratitude for his efforts. Whatever the case may be, the Jena collection, some 2,000 objects, is of an exceptional quality. Compared with the Nippur collections in Istanbul and Philadelphia, which derive from the same four expeditions, the Frau Hilprecht Sammlung has a much higher percentage of well-preserved, unusual, or otherwise exciting objects. The collection includes the famous Nippur map, and numerous very well preserved pieces of Sumerian literature.

The Jena collection used to be fairly difficult to access under DDR rules. The literary texts had been published in the nineteen sixties, but the lexical texts had hardly been touched. The historical background of the Jena collection explains why it is so exciting that the Berkeley team has received permission to edit this collection and add its results to the Digital Corpus of Cuneiform Lexical Texts (<http://oracc.org/dcclt>), an online project that aims at the publication of all cuneiform lexical texts. The Jena collection will certainly produce some ordinary run-of-the-mill exemplars – but it also has the promise of exciting new evidence that has been waiting in drawers since its excavation in the late nineteen nineties.

The project, which is supported by the Stahl Fund and a Mellon Project Grant, is not finished yet and at this point (October 2014) we cannot provide a full breakdown of the lexical treasures of the Jena collection. We did, however, already make a few exciting discoveries:

- HS 1802 (<http://oracc.org/dcclt/P229965>) is a large four-sided prism with 3 columns of text on each side (approximately 720 lines in total). It contains the wordlist Izi, a list of Sumerian words with (occasional) translation glosses in Akkadian. The Jena prism gives a version of Izi that was not known before with many new readings and new Akkadian translations. Particularly exciting about these translations is that they are often of a rather learned and speculative character, pushing at the limits of Sumerian – Akkadian equivalencies.

- HS 1659+, (<http://oracc.org/dcclt/P229794>) another four-sided prism has the Nippur list of stones, fish, birds, and textiles. Thematic word lists like these introduced Sumerian vocabulary to pupils at the scribal school. The list was well-known, but fragmentary in its reconstruction. The Jena prism adds several new sections and finally allows for a full reconstruction of the composition.

- HS 1822 (<http://oracc.org/dcclt/P229979>) is perhaps the most exciting of all. This is a copy of the "Early Dynastic Vessels and Garments" list. This list was first introduced in the Late Uruk period (around 3,200 BCE) and continued to be copied until the early second millennium. Third millennium and early second millennium copies are extremely rare, and this is an exemplar with pronunciation glosses that helps in the understanding of the obscure words included in this list.

Within the next year we will finish editing the entire collection of about 250 lexical texts from Jena. The editions will be presented in a dedicated project website and they will also be integrated into the main

DCCLT page

Jena Lexical Texts Project. Team

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Figure 1. Professor Hermann Hilprecht, dressed up as an Ottoman gentleman, in his study.

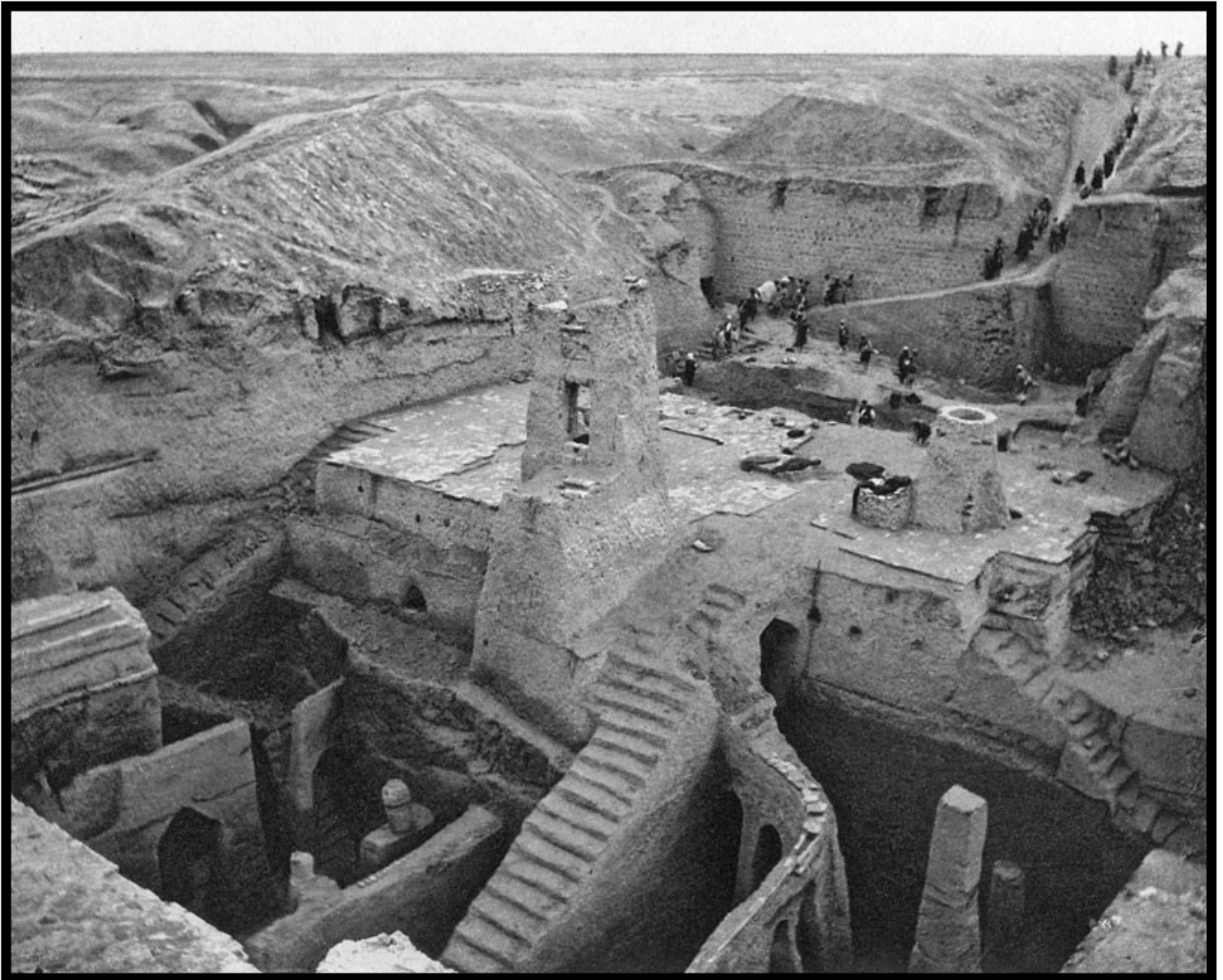


Figure 2. The Nippur temple excavation photographed by John Henry Haynes in 1893. (Courtesy University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology)