ABSTRACT SUBMISSION

How to make clay tablets: a technological approach to scribal practices in Neo-Assyrian Mesopotamia

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Abstract

Cuneiform tablets are rarely studied as archaeological artefacts. However, beyond the texts they carried, the tablets themselves can yield important information. The clay from which they are made and the techniques by which they were formed testify to scribal practices and production systems. This paper will present the objectives and methods of a major new scientific examination of Neo-Assyrian tablets. How were tablets made? Were they produced from specific clays or possibly supplied from other clay workshops (for pottery or construction)? What is the relation between clay provenance, clay processing, tablets shaping and the inscriptions' handwriting and content? Based on the British Museum collection, the "Reading beneath the texts: technological aspects of cuneiform tablet production" project focuses on a regional dataset from Nineveh, Nimrud, and Babylon. It includes samples from inscribed tablets, pottery, and architectural materials to compare clay management and processing techniques between several clay crafts. Using archaeometry and the chaîne opératoire approach, the aim is to adapt methods of clay analysis from pottery studies to epigraphic materials to build up a protocol dedicated to clay tablets, from macroscopic observation to thin section petrography, digital microscopy, SEM-EDX, X-ray CT scanning, RTI, and XRF.

Keywords

Cuneiform tablets, Technology, Clay analysis, Archaeometry, Pottery

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