



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **The taphonomy of Middle Assyrian cuneiform tablet clusters: archives or refuse?**

Klinkenberg, M.V.; Düring, B.S.

### **Citation**

Klinkenberg, M. V., & Düring, B. S. (2023). The taphonomy of Middle Assyrian cuneiform tablet clusters: archives or refuse? *Journal Of Cuneiform Studies*, 75, 61-73.  
doi:10.1086/725218

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3636669>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# THE TAPHONOMY OF MIDDLE ASSYRIAN CUNEIFORM TABLET CLUSTERS: ARCHIVES OR REFUSE?

*Victor Klinkenberg (University of Cyprus)  
and Bleda S. Düring (Leiden University)*

## Abstract

In this article we report on the taphonomic analysis of several Middle Assyrian tablet clusters to identify the way these objects ended up in the ground. Rather than in-situ archives that were left behind during some catastrophe, we argue that these tablets were often deliberately discarded. Specifically for the tablet clusters we examined, we propose that they were first temporarily discarded in “office bins.” We claim that the occurrence of clustered, homogenous tablet groups at our sites are the result of the occasional emptying of such bins. The methodology we present could be of value for the analysis of other similar tablet-bearing contexts.

## 1. Introduction

Finds of clusters of cuneiform tablets often described conventionally as “archives” (Pedersen 1988).<sup>1</sup> This concept can be intended in the literal sense, in which cuneiform clusters directly mirror ancient archives, discovered more or less in situ. The term is also used for tablet groups that were found in one identifiable location, or, in some cases, for tablets from one site that form a meaningful whole based on their textual content (Pedersen 1988: 4). In many cases, such as for most Ur III tablets, no precise archaeological context can be reconstructed, because they are mostly unprovenanced or poorly documented (Molina 2016). In cases where archaeological documentation is adequate for a contextual assessment of a tablet cluster, the use of the term *archive* should be carefully considered. An interpretation as archive could be understood to mean that the tablets were discovered in situ, left behind in their place of use or storage. Earlier assessments of the nature of tablet groups were mostly written from the point of view of archival practices and textual content (e.g., Cavigneaux 1996; Charpin 1995, 2022; Sauvage 1995). A group of texts and other administrative items found in what was clearly a rubbish pit (“Scherbenloch”) in Uruk was, for instance,

---

1. Victor Klinkenberg worked on this paper during an ONISILOS research fellowship at the University of Cyprus.

interpreted as a coherent archive because of correlations between business documents and letters found within (Cavigneaux 1996: 5).

From an archaeological point of view, such an approach raises several questions. The context and physical state of artifacts usually take prominence in the interpretation of how they ended up in the ground. From this same perspective, an interpretation of a tablet group as a coherent archive should be something rather remarkable, yet it seems to occur frequently. In archaeological practice, such an assumption, of past practices frozen in time, is often labeled “the Pompei premise” and is considered highly problematic. The vast majority of archaeological finds survive through a series of taphonomic processes, in which practices of discard take center stage rather than primary activities such as administration (Schiffer 1987; Klinkenberg 2016). Therefore, especially when important artifacts are found, considerable emphasis is usually placed in archaeological research on the systematic examination of the depositional and postdepositional processes responsible for the particular archaeological find context. This field of study is labeled taphonomy, from the Greek τάφος (burial) and νόμος (law) and was introduced first to paleontology to describe and analyze the processes of preservation and decay in ancient fossils (Martin 1999). The term is used more broadly in archaeological practice, where it also includes the study of (cultural) processes of deposition (Lyman 2010). Distinctions are often made between when a process occurred (before, during or after deposition) and by what agent (natural vs. cultural processes), all grouped under the umbrella term “site formation processes” (Schiffer 1987; Lamotta and Schiffer 1999). While taphonomic analysis is a standard feature of the archaeological toolkit, it is much less prominently discussed or applied in cuneiform studies (Brosius 2003; Joannes 1995; Matthews 2013; Taylor 2011).

In this article, we therefore present a framework for studying taphonomic processes for analyzing cuneiform clusters and the deposits within which they are found, based on physical characteristics of tablets, the strata in which they occur, and their stratigraphic context. As a case study we explore recovered cuneiform clusters at four Middle Assyrian settlements. This article demonstrates that these cuneiform clusters at the analyzed Middle Assyrian sites were mainly deposited through various forms of deliberate discard, and do not represent preserved in-situ archives. The results have significant ramifications for the interpretation of these tablet clusters and how representative they are of past realities. We argue that our methods and results are more widely relevant to the study of cuneiform clusters, and that renewed scrutiny of other existing archives for which unproblematic depositional histories have been postulated is a desideratum.

## 2. Archives in Assyriology

Cuneiform tablets are often discovered in archaeological contexts as more or less coherent clusters of texts, which are consequently often described as the preserved remains of an ancient archive (Pedersen 1998). The term *archive* is so ubiquitous in cuneiform scholarship that we cannot readily distinguish whether an author applies the term as an explicit interpretation of the find context, or out of convention, denoting a cluster of texts (Postgate 2013: 81). At one level, this designation seems unproblematic. Many tablets were likely originally stored in some ancient archive, and their find spot is often in or near an administrative structure. However, the term *archive* is problematic on an ontological level, as it suggests that we are dealing with a more or less complete and systematically ordered register of information that scholars can use to reconstruct past administrative, economic, and social realities in a reliable manner, given that the archive is considered to represent past realities in a direct way.

That many tablet groups are incomplete or contain only a selection of an original archive is often attributed to hazards of preservation, or excavation practices, thus things that happen after the formation of archaeological deposits. This view is expressed for example by Klaas Veenhof (1986: 3) who argues that

an incomplete state of an archaeological archive is due to the “hazards of archaeological discovery and the preference of certain excavators for particular types of ruins.”

Maria Brosius (2003: 5–6), who edited the most authoritative volume on archives in Assyriology states similarly:

we know very little about why groups of texts were being stored, how long they were meant to be kept, and whether, at any stage the person or institution maintaining an archive ever regarded it as “complete.” Furthermore, the question of what was being stored is complicated by the fact that archaeological finds depend somewhat on chance, since we rely on the area which has been excavated and the extent to which excavation can be carried out.

Thus, both scholars envisage the archives to have been originally complete and logically constituted records of administration.

If questions are asked about how tablets were left behind, a distinction is often made between archives that were abandoned during some catastrophe, such as a fire, an earthquake, or a wartime episode of destruction, and are thus broadly representative of an original “living” archive, on the one hand, and tablet groups that were deliberately abandoned because they were no longer in use, termed “dead” archives, on the other (Joannes 1995). These concepts have been used with some flexibility in cuneiform scholarship but broadly denote a difference between mostly complete versus depleted versions of an archive (Sauvage 1995: 53), or, as Mario Fales described it (2003: 197):

one can distinguish between archaeologically “living” archives, i.e., archives not only discovered in situ, but also in which the occupational level was not subsequently disturbed, “dead” (in situ, but variously disturbed) archives, and “silent,” i.e., contextually irretrievable, archives.

### 3. A Taphonomic Approach

What the above-mentioned perspectives on cuneiform tablet clusters have in common, is that they presuppose that tablet-bearing find contexts represent ancient archives, discovered in their original location. Such well-preserved in-situ contexts are reminiscent of the situation at Pompeii, where buildings, artifacts, and people were suddenly trapped in volcanic ashes. But such discoveries are highly exceptional, as most archaeological contexts are the result of a complex sequence of human and natural processes (Schiffer 1987). When it comes to tell deposits, the most prominent factors in the formation of archaeological deposits are various practices related to discard (Rosen 1986; Verhoeven 1999; Klinkenberg 2016).

In this light, the persistent interpretation of tablet groups as unproblematic in-situ archives deserves closer scrutiny. Depositional contexts of tablets other than archives have also been identified before, such as refuse deposits or the use of tablets in construction layers (Veenhof 1986: 2; Lecompte and Benati 2017; Işık et al. 2021; Michalowski 2021: 69). Ritual or political motives have been suggested for the destruction and burying of certain tablets as well (May 2012: 15–16; Levtow 2012: 325). Bins with record-keeping waste, and rooms full of apparently discarded school tablets indicate that recycling and discard were integral but poorly understood parts of ancient administrative practices (Taylor 2011: 21–23). This indicates that the depositional histories of tablet clusters may be more complex than commonly considered and raises the fundamental question of how and why these artifacts ended up in the place of discovery, and thus how representative they are of past administrative systems. Each tablet context will have its own unique depositional history (Postgate 2013) and must thus be individually analyzed. This aim is met through the analysis of archaeological formation processes, or *taphonomy*.



The aim of this article is to provide a framework with which these processes can be analyzed. We use this to investigate the taphonomic characteristics of tablet-bearing contexts at Tell Sabi Abyad for which we have high resolution data at our disposal. In addition, published tablet finds from three contemporary sites are also scrutinized for their contextual histories to provide a more complete picture of the likely tablet deposition processes at play in the case studies presented here. We analyze the mode of deposition of tablet-bearing contexts on the basis of the physical characteristics of tablets and their stratigraphic setting.

This analytical framework was designed to investigate activity pattern analysis at the Late Bronze Age site of Tell Sabi Abyad (Klinkenberg 2016). Nine deposit types can be distinguished (based on Schiffer 1987; LaMotta and Schiffer 1999). These include *unintentional deposits*: (1) catastrophe deposits; (2) lost items; and *intentional deposits*: (3) ritual cache deposits; (4) banking cache deposits (temporary hoards that were meant to be retrieved later); (5) burials; (6) primary discard deposits (left at the place of use); (7) secondary discard deposits (discarded away from the place of use); (8) provisional refuse (in a container for discard elsewhere); (9) de facto refuse (left during abandonment; fig. 1).

Each of these deposit types can be characterized based on its stratigraphic context and properties of the objects within this deposit: variety and structuring of objects (do all artifacts relate to the same activities), size, use-life stage (part of production process, deposited while in use, deposited when no longer usable), and damage. For instance, primary refuse is likely located on a floor level, and the artifacts will likely all relate to each other and to the space they are found in. Secondary refuse can be much more mixed and located in any context away from the likely place of use of the artifacts that are found within. An important difference is also observed between catastrophe deposits and refuse. Objects deposited during a catastrophe will likely be complete and located precisely on their location of use. Refuse will contain more broken or fragmented objects that are moved out of their original context. For a full discussion of the deposit types and characteristics, see Klinkenberg (2016: 19–38).

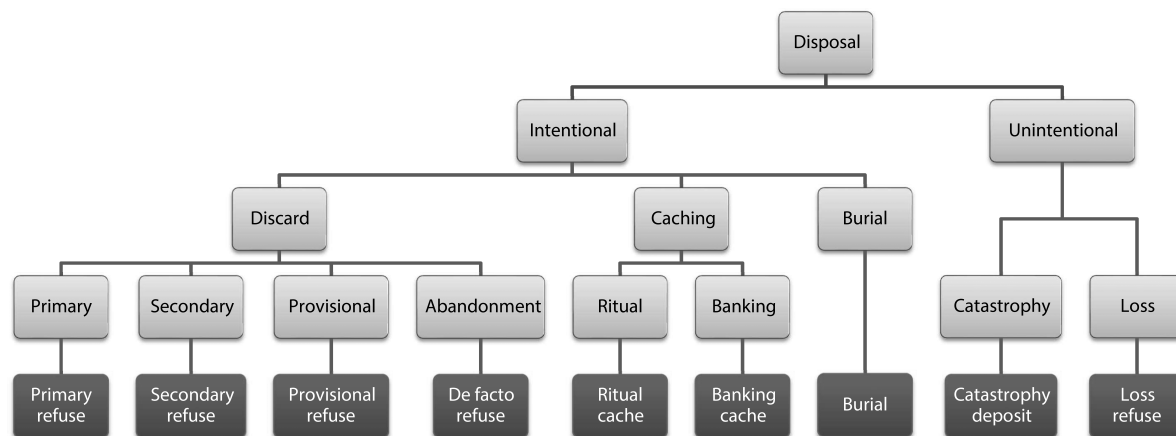


Fig. 1. The nine types of deposits broken down in intentionality and depositional process (Klinkenberg 2016: fig. 2.1).

#### 4. The Tell Sabi Abyad Cuneiform Clusters

The site of Tell Sabi Abyad, located along the Balikh Valley in northern Syria, has revealed the well-preserved remains of a Late Bronze Age settlement, a so-called *dunnu*, erected and inhabited during the Middle Assyrian occupation of the area (Akkermans 1987, 2006; Akkermans and Rossmesl 1990; Akkermans et al. 1993; Akkermans and Wiggermann 1999, 2015). The settlement consists of a small, privately owned stronghold with some large central buildings for administration, storage, and entertaining guests,

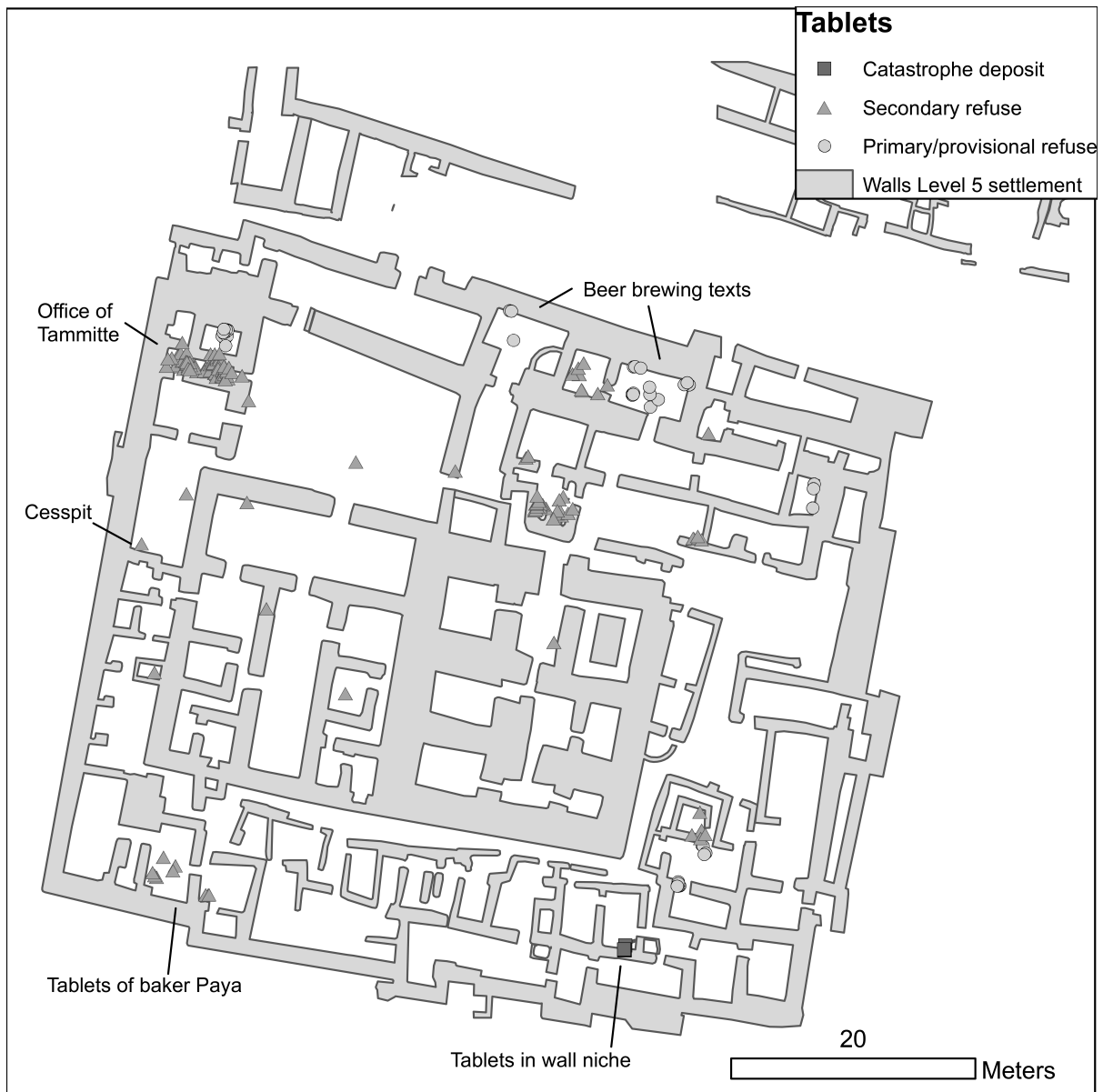


Fig. 2. Schematic overview of the walls of the Level 5 Tell Sabi Abyad settlement with tablet locations. Green circles indicate tablets found as primary/provisional or de facto refuse, left at their place of use/storage. Blue triangles are tablets which were found as secondary refuse. Red squares indicate tablets found in a catastrophe deposit.

together with various surrounding structures used for habitation, crafts, and food processing (Akkermans and Wiggermann 2015). Here, we focus on Level 5, ca. 1184–1170 BCE, the most extensively excavated and best-known stratigraphic phase of this settlement. The entire settlement was in use during this phase, and cuneiform tablets were found throughout the settlement, in clusters ranging from single fragments to over one hundred in a single deposit (fig. 2).

Most of the tablet contexts represent secondary refuse (75 percent), meaning that they were discarded away from the original place of use. Forty-six tablets (22 percent) were discovered in a context that can be

characterized as either primary refuse, provisional refuse or *de facto* (abandonment stage) refuse. These tablets were deliberately discarded or left behind in their place of use or storage. Six tablets (3 percent) were found in a wall niche of a room that appears to have been destroyed in an accidental fire, which correspond to a catastrophe deposit. Below we present a selection of the most typical deposits from this collection.

## 5. The Office of Tammitte

The excavators discovered the largest cluster of cuneiform tablets in a small apartment located along the central courtyard. The dwelling consisted of a corridor with a side room, and a double bathroom at its end. Tablets were found throughout these rooms. As most of the tablets appeared to relate in some way to the settlement administrator (or “steward” in publications by Wiggermann) Tammitte, the cluster was interpreted as the remains of his archive, and the rooms as his apartment (Akkermans and Wiggermann 2015: 99). The spatial context of the tablets seems to agree with this interpretation, as the rooms likely functioned as an office or apartment, and it is connected to the central administrative buildings of the settlement. Furthermore, the rooms are situated in a strategic position adjacent to the main entrance to the fortified estate, from which all comings and goings could be monitored.

The elucidation of the deposit as the remains of the archive, however, presupposes that they were deposited at their place of use, either as primary or provisional refuse, or through sudden abandonment—a catastrophe deposit. A detailed analysis of the relevant deposits shows us that there are two distinct depositional processes at play inside this apartment (fig. 3).

Sixteen tablets were found on the floor level inside the northern room, mostly complete, and seemingly discarded together on the floor, either during the use of the location for administration or during the abandonment and emptying of the area. These tablets were thus probably discovered in their place of use. The second group of cuneiform texts includes most of the recovered tablets. These were mixed in a fill layer underneath a floor that was forty centimeters deep and contained large amounts of charcoal and ash. The texts were fragmented and pieces that could be joined were found meters apart, and at various elevations. These tablets were thus in pieces and mixed in “dirty” soil and were deposited in a fill layer as a foundation for a new floor.

These aspects are typical for secondary refuse, discarded some place other than where they were utilized. Given that hardly any other objects were mixed in this deposit, it is likely they were discarded in one event. Curiously, some tablet fragments from this deposit could be joined with a piece discovered in a cesspit located two rooms away. The fragmentation of this tablet therefore occurred well before the decision was made to discard it.

The tablets on the floor of one of the rooms indicate that the apartment was likely used for administrative purposes. Most of the tablet fragments from the surrounding deposits, however, were discarded as secondary refuse, and were first stored and broken elsewhere. Perhaps the related administrative activities took place in the adjacent large courtyard.

## 6. The Brewery

Three rooms in the north part of the settlement that contained a concentration of large ceramic vats and strainers were identified as an area used for beer brewing. Cuneiform tablets found in these rooms confirm this interpretation as they are receipts of beer transactions and other notes written by or to the brewer (Wiggermann 2010). Seventeen tablets and fragments were found in small clusters on the floors of two of

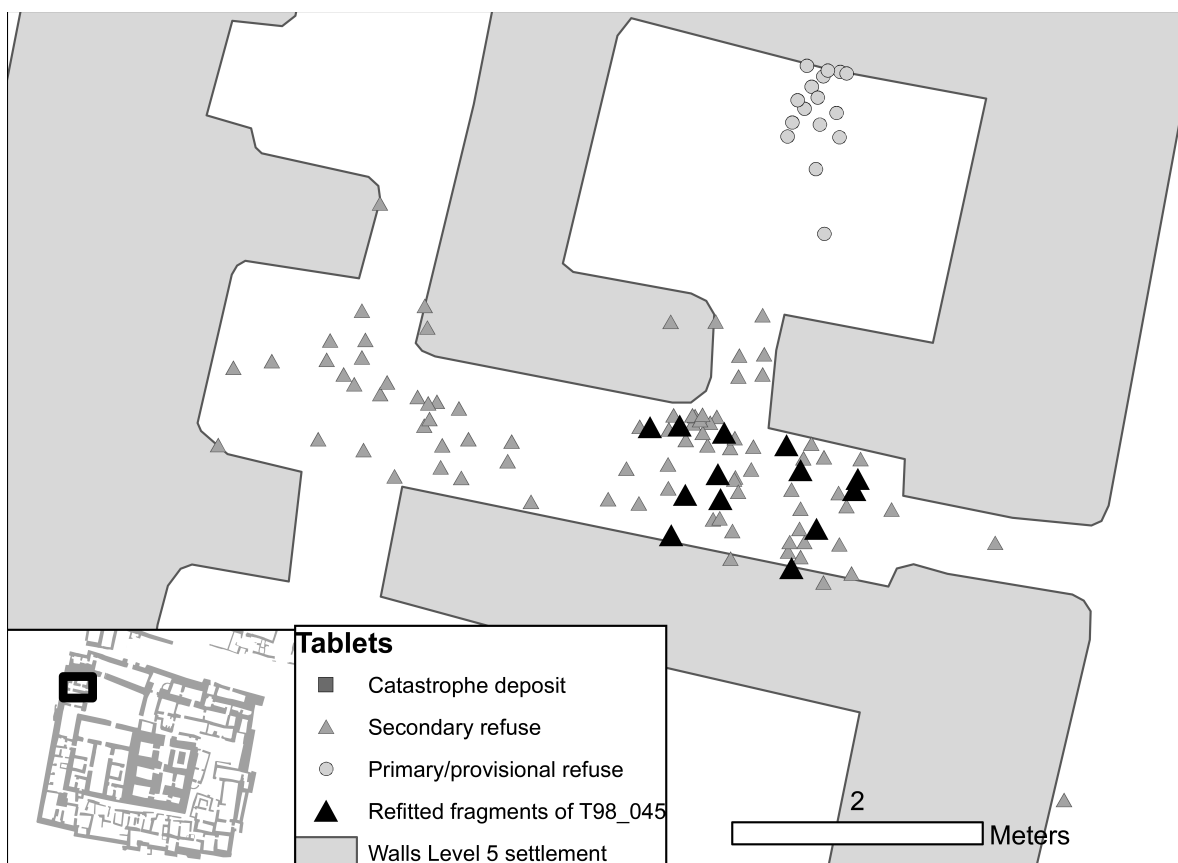


Fig. 3. Distribution of tablets in the rooms dubbed the “office of Tammitte.” Also indicated are the tablet fragments of one tablet (T98\_45) that could be refitted after excavation.

the rooms. Some groups consisted of tablets with their original clay envelopes, suggesting that they were opened, read, and deposited right there. Their likely mode of deposition may thus have been as primary or provisional refuse, or the tablets were left behind during the final abandonment of the space. A further eight tablets that were found in the intermediate space of the brewery were mixed in a dark soil with much fragmented artifacts and other household waste (see fig. 2). These tablets, which were not concerned with brewing, were therefore likely dumped as secondary refuse, long after this room was abandoned.

The tablets associated with beer brewing have a strong functional association with their find location. Rather than an abandoned archive, they likely represent documents that were discarded in the last use phase of the space. The last receipts of what must have been a more extensive tablet collection of the brewer were likely discarded elsewhere, or simply recycled.

## 7. The Bakery

As in the “office of Tammitte,” the cuneiform tablets found in the southern part of the settlement were discovered in diverse environments. Some texts were found in secondary contexts while others were left behind in their place of use. The southwest of the settlement is characterized by numerous grinding installations and bread ovens and is interpreted as a centrally organized bread-making area. Likewise, many of the tablets from this area are concerned with bread and flour and were written by a baker named Paya

(Wiggermann 2010: 22). Most of these tablets were found in a fragmentary state, mixed inside a foundation layer located under a new floor. These tablets were likely discarded as secondary refuse during the renovation of some of the rooms.

A very different tablet-bearing context was excavated to the east of the bread-baking area: six complete tablets related to the same bakery processes were found in a niche cut into the wall in a room that was destroyed during a major conflagration. The setting was trapped and sealed by the fire and subsequent collapse of the room and can be qualified as a catastrophe deposit. This is the only tablet context at Tell Sabi Abyad with such a depositional history, indicating that the room they were found in was where they were written, or at least stored.

## 8. Tablet Clusters at other Middle Assyrian Sites

The deposition of tablets in construction layers is also documented at the contemporary and nearby site of Tell Fekheriye. There, a total of fifty-one cuneiform texts were found in a layer underneath the floor of Middle Assyrian House 1. According to Dominik Bonatz (2014: 73–74)

They were discarded in this area as the terrain was filled with compact soil, broken or smashed mud-bricks and potsherds in order to build a solid foundation for the floor of the subsequent architecture.

This setting of tablet discovery is very similar what we have seen at Tell Sabi Abyad in that the main mode of deposition appears to be secondary discard in construction or renovation layers.

At Dur-Katlimmu (Tell Sheikh Hamad), the postulated capital of the western part of the Middle Assyrian Empire, a substantial tablet assemblage was found in what used to be a grain storage area, Building P. There, hundreds of tablet fragments were found in a thick ashy deposit, together with clay sealing fragments, ceramics, and animal bones (Kühne 2021). The deposit was located in between mud-brick layers that represent the collapsed vaulted ceiling of an upper floor. The excavators interpret this as an archive that had fallen from the upper story during a major fire combined with an earthquake, but they also mention that the tablets were fragmented before final deposition (Rohde 2021). The variety of artifacts and their state upon deposition (burnt, fragmented, dispersed, mixed in a thick ashy layer) suggests that the items are part of a secondary discard rather than the remains of an in-situ archive.

Even in cases where an interpretation as an archive might seem clear-cut, closer inspection of data might tell us otherwise. At the site of Giricano, a jar containing a total of fifteen Middle Assyrian texts were found, which were mainly promissory notes (Radner 2004). The collection was interpreted as the archive of one Ahuni, who was a party in all the transactions either as creditor or as receiver (Radner 2004: 69). According to the excavators the jar was originally closed by a lid made from the base of a broken ring-base bowl and then sealed with cloth of some kind held in place by a rough lump of clay at the time of deposition (Roaf 2004: 16, Radner 2004: 51).

So far, this all seems rather straightforward. Yet the jar was found in a poorly defined context, possibly to be associated with a large pit feature, rather than in a room of a building. So how did this jar end up in this location? It turns out that the tablets were almost all broken and incomplete prior to ending up in this jar, while the jar itself was also damaged before its deposition, despite the very careful excavation of this context (Roaf 2004: 20). Also, the notion that the jar was sealed was based mostly on the discovery of sealing fragments. So, again, an interpretation of intentional discard as refuse is more likely. The tablet fragments were likely discarded as provisional refuse in the jar, which was subsequently deposited as secondary refuse. This specific context is in fact a highly informative one, characteristic of what might have been a common practice in Middle Assyrian administration to which we will return in the next section (see also Charpin 2020: 15–16; Pfälzner and Qasim 2018: 59).

Finds of tablets in jars are not uncommon in Middle Assyrian sites, with known examples from Assur, Kar Tukulti-Ninurta, Dur-Katlimmu, and Tell Rimah (Radner 2004: 51; Postgate 2013: 83–85). Often the find of such jars containing cuneiform tablets is presented as representing an archive (Radner 2004: 51; Postgate 2013: 178), but in many cases these jars are found in atypical locations, were broken, or contain broken and only partially complete tablets, and often with thematically associated texts also found in other places. These things suggest that many of these jars are office bins rather than discrete archives. For example, J. N. Postgate (2013: 178) discusses the Assur archive of “Mutta the animal-fattener” as follows (emphasis added):

An assemblage of 112 tablets was found with *the broken sherds of a large jar* in which it had been evidently stored, and was numbered Ass. 6096. This jar was in squares eE5IV and eE5III, at a depth of 3 metres *in fill* very close to the east side of the brick foundation platform of the Anu-Adad temple, at a spot about 3.5 metres north of the gateway between the temple and Old Palace. The tablets belong closely together as a single archive, as is obvious from their contents, *but a few tablets which belong to the same archive were also found in the vicinity*. A jarful of tablets like this must presumably have been housed in a building of some kind, and it seems clear from the content of the texts that this was associated in some way with the royal palace directly to the east, rather than the Anu-Adad temple.

## 9. Discussion

In all the discussed contexts the interpretation of tablet clusters as *archives* is highly problematic. Instead of a depleted or incompletely excavated archive, tablet clusters usually comprise discarded and already fragmented objects, that were discarded in fill layers deposited at moments of architectural renovations in a rather haphazard manner. That is not to say that in-situ archives cannot be found in archaeological contexts, but they are exceptionally rare, as the single catastrophe deposit at Tell Sabi Abyad illustrates. However appealing contexts such as that of the catastrophically destroyed Ebla archive (Archi 2015) may be, they are the exceptions that prove the point.

Two aspects of tablet cluster contexts are highlighted here. First, many tablets were already fragmented and sometimes burnt before their final deposition. This indicates that the objects were temporarily discarded elsewhere, and perhaps also purposefully fragmented and burnt. At a later stage in this discard process, it was decided to redeposit the tablets together with other trash in a construction layer.

This leads to the second observation, which is that much of the material is found in construction or renovation layers. At Tell Sabi Abyad, nearly all tablets were found in between floors, deposited during renovation, and this is also the case at Tell Fekheriye. At Dur-Katlimmu, the cuneiform texts were found in a layer that was part of a leveling of the entire building. Clearly these areas were considered appropriate locations for the disposal of documents.

Several tablets from the office of Tammitte and the brewery in the north of the Tell Sabi Abyad settlement do not fall in the category of secondary refuse, nor were they deposited in some catastrophe. Rather, their depositional history is linked to processes of primary, provisional, or abandonment stage discard during the final phase of use of the areas.

For these tablets that were deposited on their place of use, there is a clear functional correlation with the find location. Yet, most tablets that were discarded as secondary refuse were also found in or near their likely place of use and they often form meaningful collections. The tablets in the office of Tammitte are for a large part written by, or addressed to, Tammitte. Likewise, in the bakery area of Tell Sabi Abyad we find clusters of discarded texts concerned with the baking of bread in an area that was used exactly for that purpose. So, it is not without reason that it was suggested that these represent a personal or institutional archive of sorts. However, our evidence also suggests that the practices through which these texts were



discarded are complex and that the preservation of certain tablets was random and determined by periodic building episodes that created suitable windows to dump textual rubbish.

## 10. The Bin Hypothesis

The way tablets end up in the archaeological record is highly varied and should be assessed on a case-by-case basis (Postgate 2013). Nevertheless, we will attempt to offer a working hypothesis that may explain the character of most tablet deposits at the case studies presented here.

Based on the evidence for secondary discard, it appears that during administrative activities, people had temporary refuse storage in or near their place of work. This is where tablets that were no longer of use were discarded, prior to their final disposal or recycling. Possibly at this time, they made sure that the tablets were no longer usable, by breaking them. As a modern parallel we can think of our office waste bins. Tablets that were no longer relevant were thrown into tablet-bins, sometimes together with other types of waste. A tablet-bin (a basket or a large pot most likely) could be scavenged for other purposes. The tablet fragment in the cesspit at Tell Sabi Abyad, for example, might have been used for hygienic purposes—as toilet paper.

Such waste buckets would have been regularly emptied, and in many cases, this might have been in a water basin to recycle the tablet clay (Taylor and Cartwright 2011). In other cases, the contents of the waste buckets were thrown as fill into a construction layer when, for example, a floor was being raised, as at Tell Sabi Abyad and at Tell Fekheriye. When the waste bucket itself broke, the entire thing might have been discarded in a convenient spot—this could be a scenario for the tablet-bearing jar at Giricano and that of Mutta at Assur.

The waste-bin hypothesis has two major implications. First, the content of a bin at any point would be a relatively random assortment of information. It does not represent well what the user of that bin was occupied with, instead it illustrates which texts were no longer of use to this person. Second, the preservation of these waste bins is based on rather random events. At Giricano the waste-jar probably broke, while at Tell Sabi Abyad and Tell Fekheriye some bins were discarded in a construction layer when those were available. In other cases, tablets were likely destroyed or recycled by dumping them in water. How representative tablet groups are of ancient administrative practices may thus be vastly different than has been assumed so far.

This is not to claim that all known tablet contexts are the result of secondary or provisional discard, but the unsubstantiated claim of so many tablet contexts as in-situ archives (e.g., Baker 2003; Millard 2005: 306) can no longer be upheld. We call for a profound role for archaeological (i.e., taphonomic) analysis in the study of find contexts with tablets, and for the renewed scrutiny of existing archives.

## 11. Conclusions

We have reexamined several Middle Assyrian contexts in which collections of cuneiform tablets were found. The tablets were found in clusters of single topics or addressees, and they were found in or near their likely place of storage and use. This has prompted initial interpretations of these contexts as archives that were left behind in their place of use. Our taphonomic analysis of these contexts using the *modes of deposition* framework shows that most tablet-bearing contexts were the result of secondary discard, that is, the deliberate and delayed disposal of things. The excavated tablet clusters therefore do not represent abandoned archives, but a haphazard selection of texts that were disposed of in a convenient way.



We further suggest that in the Middle Assyrian contexts discussed here, for a large part the disposal of tablets was based on the presence of “office bins,” temporary discard collections that were emptied or dissolved regularly. This has considerable implications for the manner in which these tablet collections can be interpreted and how they might (not) represent ancient administrative practices. We argue that taphonomic analysis should be undertaken for all cuneiform tablet clusters, new and old. The notion that these tablet clusters represent archives needs to be based not only on their textual homogeneity and find location, but also on a thorough analysis of their depositional histories.

## Bibliography

- Akkermans, P. M. M. G.  
 1987 Tell Sabi Abyad: Preliminary Report on the 1986 Excavations. *Akkadica* 52: 10–28.  
 2006 The Fortress of Ili-Pada-Middle Assyrian Architecture at Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria. Pp. 201–11 in *Les espaces syro-mésopotamiens: Dimensions de l'expérience humaine au Proche-Orient ancien; Volume d'hommage offert à Jean-Claude Margueron*, ed. P. Butterlin, M. Lebeau, J.-Y. Monchambert, J. L. Montero Fenollós, and B. Muller. Subartu 17. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Akkermans, P. M. M. G., Limpens, J., and Spoor, R. H.  
 1993 On the Frontier of Assyria: Excavations at Tell Sabi Abyad, 1991. *Akkadica* 84–85: 1–52.
- Akkermans, P. M. M. G., and Wiggermann, F. A. M.  
 1999 La Forteresse de Tell Sabi Abyad. *Archéologia* 358: 56–65.  
 2015 West of Aššur: The Life and Times of the Middle Assyrian Dunnu at Tell Sabi Abyad. Pp. 89–123 in *Understanding Hegemonic Practices of the Early Assyrian Empire: Essays Dedicated to Frans Wiggermann*, ed. B. S. Düring. PIHANS 125. Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten.
- Akkermans, P. M. M. G., and Rossmeisl, I.  
 1990 Excavations at Tell Sabi Abyad, Northern Syria: A Regional Centre on the Assyrian Frontier. *Akkadica* 66: 13–60.
- Archi, A.  
 2015 *Ebla and Its Archives: Texts, History, and Society*. SANER 7. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Baker, H. D.  
 2003 Record-Keeping Practices as Revealed by the Neo-Babylonian Private Archival Documents. Pp. 241–63 in *Ancient Archives and Archival Traditions: Concepts of Record-Keeping in the Ancient World*, ed. M. Brosius. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bonatz, D.  
 2014 Tell Fekheriye in the Late Bronze Age: Archaeological Investigations into the Structures of Political Governance in the Upper Mesopotamian Piedmont. Pp. 61–84 in *The Archaeology of Political Spaces: The Upper Mesopotamian Piedmont in the Second Millennium BCE*, ed. D. Bonatz. Topoi 12. Berlin: de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110266405.61>.
- Brosius, M.  
 2003 Ancient Archives and Concepts of Record-Keeping: An Introduction. Pp. 1–16 in *Ancient Archives and Archival Traditions: Concepts of Record-Keeping in the Ancient World*, ed. M. Brosius. Oxford Studies in Ancient Documents. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cavigneaux, A.  
 1996 *Uruk: Altbabylonische Texte aus dem Planquadrat Pe XVI-4/5 nach Kopien von Adam Falkenstein*. AUWE 23. Mainz: von Zabern.
- Charpin, D.  
 1995 La fin des archives dans le palais de Mari. *RA* 89: 29–40.  
 2020 Les découvertes épigraphiques de Taylor à Ur en 1854: Nouvelle approche. Pp. 13–42 in *Nouvelles recherches sur les archives d'Ur d'époque paléo-babylonienne*, ed. D. Charpin, M. Béranger, B. Fiette, and A. Jacquet. Archibab 4 = Mémoires de N.A.B.U. 22. Paris: SÉPOA.  
 2022 *Civilisation mésopotamienne*. L'annuaire du Collège de France 119. <https://doi.org/10.4000/annuaire-cdf.17190>
- Fales, F.M.  
 2003 Reflections on Neo-Assyrian Archives. Pp. 195–229 in *Ancient Archives and Archival Traditions: Concepts of*

- Record-Keeping in the Ancient World*, ed. M. Brosius. Oxford Studies in Ancient Documents. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Işık, K., Aras, O., and Akın Aras, A.  
 2021 Inscribed Bullae Found during Excavations on the Northern Slope of Ayanis Fortress in 2015 and a New Urartian Building Name, <sup>†</sup>Tamali. *JCS* 73: 179–91. <https://doi.org/10.1086/714659>.
- Joannès, F.  
 1995 Les phénomènes de fin d'archives en mésopotamie: présentation. *RA* 89: 1–2. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23281958>
- Klinkenberg, V.  
 2016 *Reading Rubbish: Using Object Assemblages to Reconstruct Activities, Modes of Deposition and Abandonment at the Late Bronze Age Dunnu of Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria*. PIHANS 129. Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten.
- Kühne, H.  
 2021 *The Citadel of Dur-Katlimmu in Middle and Neo-Assyrian Times*. Berichte der Ausgrabung Tall Šeḫ Ḥamad/Dür-Katlimmu 12. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- LaMotta, V. M., and Schiffer, M. B.  
 1999 Formation Processes of House Floor Assemblages. Pp. 19–29 in *The Archaeology of Household Activities*, ed. P. M. Allison. London: Routledge.
- Lecompte, C., and Benati, G.  
 2017 Nonadministrative Documents from Archaic Ur and from Early Dynastic I–II Mesopotamia: A New Textual and Archaeological Analysis. *JCS* 69: 3–31. <https://doi.org/10.5615/jcunestud.69.2017.0003>.
- Levtow, N. B.  
 2012 Text Destruction and Iconoclasm in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East. Pp. 311–62 in *Iconoclasm and Text Destruction in the Ancient Near East and Beyond*, ed. N. N. May. OIS 8. Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.
- Lyman, R. L.  
 2010 What Taphonomy Is, What It Isn't, and Why Taphonomists Should Care about the Difference. *Journal of Taphonomy* 8: 1–16.
- Martin, R.  
 1999 *Taphonomy: A Process Approach*. Cambridge Paleobiology Series 4. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Matthews, R.  
 2013 Writing (and Reading) as Material Practice: The World of Cuneiform Culture as an Arena for Investigation. Pp. 65–74 in *Writing as Material Practice: Substance, Surface and Medium*, ed. K. E. Piquette and R. D. Whitehouse. London: Ubiquity.
- May, N. N.  
 2012 Iconoclasm and Text Destruction in the Ancient Near East. Pp. 1–32 in *Iconoclasm and Text Destruction in the Ancient Near East and Beyond*, ed. N. N. May. OIS 8. Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.
- Michalowski, P.  
 2021 They Wrote on Clay, Wax, and Stone: Some Thoughts on Early Mesopotamian Writing. Pp. 67–88 in *Exploring Written Artefacts: Objects, Methods, and Concepts*, ed. J. B. Quenzer. Studies in Manuscript Cultures 25. Berlin: de Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110753301-005>.
- Millard, A.  
 2005 Only Fragments from the Past: The Role of Accident in Our Knowledge of the Past. Pp. 301–19 in *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society: Papers in Honour of Alan R. Millard*, ed. P. Bienkowski, C. Mee, and E. Slater. New York: T&T Clark.
- Molina, M.  
 2016 Archives and Bookkeeping in Southern Mesopotamia during the Ur III Period. *Comptabilités* 8. <http://journals.openedition.org/comptabilites/1980>.
- Pedersén, O.  
 1998 *Archives and Libraries in the Ancient Near East, 1500–300 B.C.* Bethesda, MD: CDL.
- Pfälzner, P., and Qasim, H. A.  
 2018 Urban Developments in Northeastern Mesopotamia from the Ninevite V to the Neo-Assyrian Periods: Excavations at Bassetki in 2017. *ZOA* 11: 42–87.

- Postgate, J. N.  
 2013 *Bronze Age Bureaucracy: Writing and the Practice of Government in Assyria*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Radner, K.  
 2004 *Das Mittelassyrische Tontafelarchiv von Giricano/Dunnu-ša-Uzibi*. Ausgrabungen in Giricano 1. Subartu 14. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Roaf, M.  
 2004 The Excavation and Conservation of the Jar and the Tablets. Pp. 15–49 in *Das Mittelassyrische Tontafelarchiv von Giricano/Dunnu-ša-Uzibi*, ed. K. Radner. Ausgrabungen in Giricano 1. Subartu 14. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Rohde, J.  
 2021 Die Dokumentation der Fallage der mittelassyrischen Keilschrift-Artefakte. Pp. 113–42 in *Die Zitadelle von Dur-Katlimmu in mittel- und neuassyrischer Zeit*, ed. H. Kühne. BATSH 12.1. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Rosen, A.  
 1986 *Cities of Clay: The Geoarchaeology of Tells*. Prehistoric Archeology and Ecology. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sauvage, M.  
 1995 Le contexte archéologique et la fin des archives a Khirbet ed-Diniyé, Harâdum. RA 89: 41–55.
- Schiffer, M. B.  
 1987 *Formation Processes of the Archaeological Record*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Taylor, J.  
 2011 Tablets as Artefacts, Scribes as Artisans. Pp. 4–31 in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, ed. K. Radner and E. Robson. Oxford Handbooks. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxford-hb/9780199557301.013.0001>.
- Taylor, J., and Cartwright, C.  
 2011 The Making and Re-making of Clay Tablets. *Scienze dell'Antichità* 17: 297–324.
- Veenhof, K. R.  
 1986 Cuneiform Archives: An Introduction. Pp. 1–36 in *Cuneiform Archives and Libraries: Papers Read at the 30e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale Leiden*, ed. K. R. Veenhof. PIHANS 57. Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten.
- Verhoeven, M.  
 1999 *An Archaeological Ethnography of a Neolithic Community: Space, Place and Social Relations in the Burnt Village at Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria*. PIHANS 83. Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten.
- Wiggermann, F. A. M.  
 2010 *Wein, Weib und Gesang* in een Midden-Assyrische nederzetting aan de Balikh. *Phoenix* 56: 17–60.