

## **SAW Conference: Scholars and Scholarship in Late Babylonian Uruk**

**March 23-24, 2015**

**The International Conference is co-organised by Christine Proust and John Steele and supported by the European project SAW (CNRS & University Paris Diderot) and the Department of Egyptology and Assyriology at Brown University.**

**Venue: Paris Diderot University, Condorcet Building  
4 rue Elsa Morante 75013 Paris or 10 rue Alice Domon et Léonie Duquet  
75013 Paris, <http://sawerc.hypotheses.org/practical-information>**

**Room 646 A**

**9.30 am-5.30 pm**

### **I. Description**

The city of Uruk was a major centre of scholarship in Late Babylonian Mesopotamia (second half of the first millennium BCE). Excavations in Uruk have provided a rich variety of documents, often available with some archaeological information, on the individuals and groups who practiced a range of scholarly activities such as mathematics, the astral sciences, medicine and rituals. Most of these documents were part of scholarly libraries. The goal of this conference is to understand mathematical practices in the broad context of scholarship in Uruk. To that end the contributors examine the interrelation of different genres of scholarship and the circulation of knowledge between individuals or communities of scholars (professions, families, clans, generations, etc) inside Uruk, and from Uruk to other scholarly centres. We expect cases studies grounded on well-delimited collections of tablets which also address broader questions which might include: Who were the scholars who wrote mathematical and other scholarly texts in Uruk? How do we identify and characterize mathematical practices in astral sciences, medicine, and rituals? Which relations can be established between these prac-

tices and those documented by mathematical texts? What are the specificities of erudition in Uruk? How did scientific texts fit into the organization of scholarly libraries and of professions? What was the influence of Urukian science in the Hellenistic world and vice versa?

## II. Programme

### Political and intellectual context

March 23, 2015

9.30 am-11 am

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**Philippe Clancier** (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne)

*The Urukian scholars from the end of the Achaemenid period to the beginning of the Arsacid era*

**Abstract:** The City of Uruk offers a rare study case on the Assyro-Babylonian scholarly disciplines, thanks to the find of texts both from private houses and temples areas. Thus, we not only have access to the data but also to the main actors involved in the transmission of the knowledge: the exorcists-doctors, the lamentation priests, the astrologers and so on.

The scholars and their texts can be studied through the tablets they wrote and kept. In this presentation, I will present first the place where the tablets were produced and/or kept which offers the primary contextual approach for the study of the scholarly society of Late Babylonian Uruk. A second contextual approach concerns the political place of the scholars of the main sanctuaries and its evolution throughout the late period. The main families working for the temples were also involved in the political life of Uruk. This period saw the Alexandrine conquest, the building, life and death of the Seleucid empire, with many political and administrative changes, and the arrival of new masters during Parthian rule. The story of the main Urukian sanctuaries, the Rēš and Irigal temples, as well as the *āšipu*'s private houses offer the opportunity to follow decades of the history of Uruk from the fifth century to the very end of the second century B.C.

My paper will focus on those main contexts, trying to put scholarly tablets and the scholarly milieu within a local and sometimes more Mesopotamian story.

## Mathematics and astronomy

### 11.30 am-1 pm

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**John Steele** (Brown University)

*Astronomical Activity in the 'House of the āšīpus' in Uruk*

**Abstract:** Excavations of a private house in the southeastern quarter of Uruk during the 1960-70s yielded a large number of scholarly cuneiform tablets that can be associated with two families of *āšīpus* who lived in the house respectively during the fifth and the fourth and early third centuries BC. Several studies, eg by Clancier, Robson and Ossendrijver, have provided us with a detailed understanding of the occupants of the house and the contents of the tablet archives. A considerable number of astronomical and astrological tablets are preserved among the scholarly material found in this house. In this paper I will examine these sources in order to present a picture of the range of astronomical activity undertaken by the occupants of this house and the interconnections between the different astronomical texts, and then compare this with evidence from other sites in Babylonia in order to investigate whether this astronomical activity is typical or atypical of Late Babylonian astronomical practice.

### 2 pm-3.30 pm

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**Christine Proust** (Sphère, CNRS & University Paris Diderot, SAW Project)

*Mathematical texts from the "House of āšīpus" in Uruk*

**Abstract:** Most of the mathematical texts from Late Babylonian Uruk were found in the so-called "House of the *āšīpus*" (kind of ritual experts), altogether with other scholarly texts, including astronomical, astrological medical, lexical texts. My presentation will be based on a close examination of the content of the set of eleven mathematical texts discovered in this house in order to detect the specificities of mathematical practices developed by the families who wrote, copied, or acquired scholarly tablets during several generations. A particular attention will be paid to the way in which numbers and measuring units are handled out in calculation and quantification. Were the metrological and numerical systems used in mathematical texts the same as in contemporary astronomical texts found in the same house? Did these systems change during the history of the occupation of the house? Which contrasts and similarities can be detected between mathematical and metrological practices attested in the "House of *āšīpus*", and the ones evidenced in other Urukian or Babylonian libraries? These are the main issues to be addressed.

### 4 pm-5.30 pm

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**Mathieu Ossendrijver** (Humboldt University)

*Mathematical Practices in the Rēš temple*

**Abstract:** This paper investigates mathematical practices in the *Rēš* temple as attested in mathematical, astronomical and other scholarly texts. Differences and similarities between the practices underlying the mathematical texts and the astronomical texts are explored. The

question is addressed whether mathematics was an independent field of scholarship that is not auxiliary to astronomical computation.

## Astrology and rituals

March 24, 2015

9.30 am-11 am

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**Hermann Hunger** (University of Vienna)

*Astrological Texts from Late Babylonian Uruk*

**Abstract:** Only about 60 astrological texts are preserved from Uruk, compared with the more frequent astronomical texts, not to mention the numerous texts about other omina, incantations and medicine. Some astrological tablets contain texts known from elsewhere, others show significant variations. In this paper I shall try to present a few texts with interesting peculiarities produced by Uruk scribes.

11.30 am -1 pm

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**Julia Krul** (Leiden University)

*"Star Anu, Lord of Heaven": The influence of the celestial sciences on temple rituals in Hellenistic Uruk and Babylon*

**Abstract:** The final stages of cuneiform scholarship saw the emergence of mathematical astronomy and zodiacal astrology not only as disciplines in their own right, but also as the foundation of a newly conceptualized, integrative world system. The zodiacal signs and the behaviour of the planets came to be seen as fundamentally interconnected with the Babylonian scholars' other spheres of expertise, such as medical practice and the proper rites of interaction with the divine realm, especially the daily worship in the temples. This paper will further explore the intersection of astrology, astronomy and religious worship in ritual texts from Late Babylonian Uruk, situating these texts within the context of scholarship at Uruk, and investigate how the growing prominence of the celestial sciences in Babylonian scholarly thought influenced conceptions of the divine and the organisation of the temple cults. In addition, the texts from Uruk will be compared to those from Babylon in order to identify any particularly Urukean responses to these influences.

## Uruk in the Hellenistic world

### 2 pm-3.30 pm

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**Paul-Alain Beaulieu** (University of Toronto)

*Cross-fertilization between Greek and Babylonian Thought in Seleucid Uruk*

**Abstract:** This presentation will explore some aspects of the interaction between Babylonian and Greek thought during the Hellenistic period as it is documented by scholarly tablets discovered at Uruk. First I will briefly consider the sociological and socio-linguistic background of Greek influence and the acculturation of native Babylonians in the dominant Hellenistic civilization, including the question of Greek settlements in Babylonia and at Uruk in particular, the question of double names and also the presence of Greek loanwords in cuneiform texts, although these occur mostly in the administrative sphere. The main part of the presentation will concentrate on scholarly tablets from Uruk in which one can detect cross-fertilization between Babylonian and Greek thought. One is the description of constellations contained in a large tablet to be published by John Steele, Wayne Horowitz and me together with similar uranological texts; the tablet contains a short, native explanation for the reinterpretation of the traditional Babylonian constellation of the Hired Man into the Greek view of that constellation as a Ram (I will also consider the alternative explanation that the reinterpretation was a purely Babylonian development). The other text I will discuss may reflect cosmological views that are very close to Pythagorean theories propagated in the works of the philosopher Philolaus (ca. 470-385 BCE); this text will form the main part of my presentation.

### 4 pm-5.30 pm

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**Alexander Jones** (New-York University)

*Uruk and the Greco-Roman World*

**Abstract:** Uruk's prominence as a center of astronomical activity appears to have ceased well before the end of the second century BCE. Nevertheless Greco-Roman authors were still linking Uruk and its inhabitants to astronomy and astrology as much as three centuries after this decline. My paper explores the questions of what classical authors thought that they knew about Uruk, and what relation these beliefs had to historical reality.