

Another day at the office: Tracking epistemic change in the minutiae of daily work-life in ancient Mesopotamia

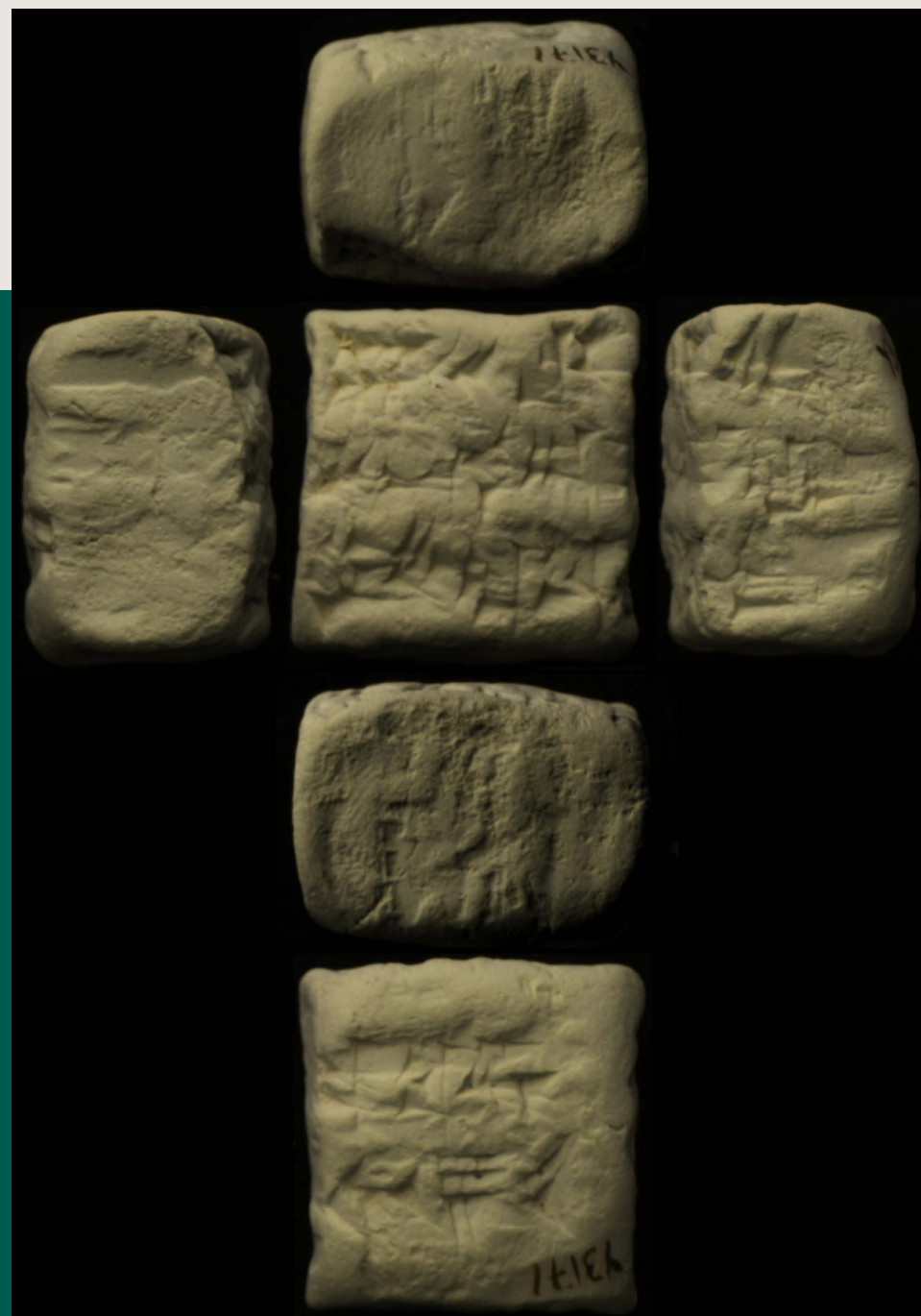
Talk by Dr. Robert Middeke-Conlin

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 4, 2024

18:00–20:00

**ROOM 010
INSTITUTE FOR THE HISTORY OF
KNOWLEDGE IN THE ANCIENT
WORLD I**

**ARNIMALLEE 10 I
14195 BERLIN**



Ever wondered how small changes can ripple into big shifts? Join us as we delve into the world of ancient Mesopotamia and uncover a fascinating tale of administrative innovation.

During the Old Babylonian period (1800-1700 BCE), a nameless middle manager, working in a brick production bureau, sparked a change in the way brick deliveries were recorded. This seemingly minor adjustment was, in fact, a testament to a larger, ongoing transformation in mathematical reasoning. By examining a collection of sixty tablets and bullae, we'll explore the cognitive leaps that led to this administrative innovation. What challenges did our administrator face? How did they approach problem-solving in an era of epistemic change?

Come witness the innovations of this anonymous administrator from Southern Iraq and discover the power of small actions in effecting epistemic changes with profound consequences.



Robert Middeke-Conlin is a historian of knowledge and Assyriologist specializing in ancient southern Mesopotamian knowledge systems, particularly mathematics. Following his MA from Yale University and PhD from the SPHERE laboratory in Paris, he has held prestigious fellowships at the University of Copenhagen, the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, and Yale University. His research has resulted in two books: *The Making of a Scribe: Errors, Mistakes, and Rounding Numbers in the Old Babylonian Kingdom of Larsa* (2020) and *Knowledge, Literacy, and Elementary Education in the Old Babylonian period* (2023). Currently, as a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Geoanthropology in Jena, he is investigating epistemic change in ancient Mesopotamia and organizing the legacy of Peter Damerow, a seminal historian of science, foundational figure at the MPIWG, and co-founder of the Cuneiform Digital Library project.

Image credits: YBC 03171, a tablet dealing with brick deliveries. Photographed by Klaus Wagensohnner.