

An Artifact Speaks • Artifact Information Sheet

Artifact Name: Cuneiform Tablet

Time Period of the Original: c. 2400 BCE

Culture/Religion Group: Ancient Mesopotamia

Material of the Original: Clay

Reproduction? Yes



Background Information:

This is the written information that came with the artifact, which is a replica of a tablet in the collection of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. (It has been slightly edited for clarification.)

“The Sumerian physician went to botanical, zoological, and mineralogical sources for his material medica. His favorite minerals were sodium chloride (table salt), river bitumen, and vegetable oil. Animal sources were wool, mink, turtle shell, and water snake. Like their modern counterparts, most of the medical ingredients came from the botanical world. The plant sources included thyme, mustard, plum tree, pears, figs, willow, fir, pine, and products such as beer, wine, and vegetable oil.

This reproduction of a medical tablet is one of the oldest found, dating to 2400 BCE. This Sumerian tablet was excavated at the site of the ancient city of Nippur in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). The writing is cuneiform, an ancient style of writing used by five distinctive languages over a period of 3000 years. Cuneiform was written by scribes using a stylus, a sharp ended reed; these made wedge shapes in clay. These clay tablets were used for everyday communication and as teaching tools.

In Mesopotamia, the ability to collect and store knowledge came with the invention of writing (ca. 3400 BCE). Medical knowledge which had been collected over generations by those who practiced cures and learned through trial and error was then recorded. From these records we know that the Goddess of healing and patron of doctors was Gula (a.k.a. Nintinuga, Bau, and Meme). Her temples were centers of medical learning and diagnosis, as well as libraries of medical information.

Cuneiform texts, such as this tablet, provide information on Mesopotamian medical practices. There were two types of medical practices, each with their own medical texts. There were the *asu* who relied on a “practical” approach, and their texts describe symptoms and the treatment for those symptoms using prescriptions based on plant, animal, and mineral substances. The second practitioners were the *ashipu* who sought the cause of the illness in the spiritual realm and the “magical” remedies that applied. On some occasions, either practitioner might use the other’s methods, or both practitioners might collaborate.

This tablet is unlike other later medical tablets: no ailment or treatment is listed. This tablet lists

prescriptions perhaps used by an early pharmacist. Amounts of the substances are not specified.

The front of the tablet is damaged. The reverse side is relatively undamaged and lists 15 prescriptions.

Prescriptions found on tablets are divided into three groups: poultice, potion and a complex group that includes poultices. Following are a few from this tablet.

Poultices

Stated simply, a poultice is a warm, medicated dressing. The tablet first provides a list of ingredients to be utilized with each prescription. These are then pulverized and mixed with a liquid in order to form a paste. This is then fastened as a poultice to the 'sick' part of the body after it has been rubbed with oil. The rubbing with oil is done either for its intrinsic value or to keep the paste from clinging to the skin. Here is an example:

Prescription 4: Pulverize the branches of the thorn plant and seeds of the duashbur; pour diluted beer over it, rub with vegetable oil and fasten the paste over the sick spot as a poultice.

Potions

This group of prescriptions was intended to be taken internally. Here is one of the prescriptions listed:

Prescription 9: Pour strong beer over the resin of the (?) plant; heat over a fire; put this liquid in river bitumen (oil), and let the sick person drink.

These prescriptions seem to be introduced by a difficult and enigmatic passage which reads, 'arrange (?) the rushes[?] over the hands and feet of the sick person. Following this,"

- Dr. Erle Leichty and Carole Linaerman, Scientific Advisors

See the Cuneiform Information Sheet for general information on cuneiform writing.