

## Cuneiform forgeries in the *Museu Bíblic* of Montserrat (Barcelona)

Ignacio Márquez Rowe – Manuel Molina  
Instituto de Filología (CSIC), Madrid

“Four-fifths of all the antiquities offered for sale in Bagdad are spurious”. The statement is not taken from a recent report of the Department of Antiquities in Iraq following the, alas, continuing looting of ancient Mesopotamian sites after the US-led invasion of the country. They are the opening words of Edgar James Banks’ “Spurious Antiquities in Bagdad” published in *The American Journal of Semitic Languages* as early as October 1904.<sup>1</sup> Stories of fakes and forgeries have a long history in the Near East. It is well-known that the first cuneiform forgeries of modern times appear even before the decipherment of the script itself. Suffice it to recall the examples in the manuscript collection of Claudius James Rich eventually acquired by the British Museum and now in beautiful display in the room of the former King’s Library. These early examples perfectly illustrate the famous statement with which Eckhardt Unger opened the entry on fakes in the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*: “Solange es Menschen gibt, die Antiken sammeln, wird es auch Menschen geben, die Antiken fälschen”.<sup>2</sup> This is indeed another way of saying that forgers are creatures of the market. But it is not the more or less regular commerce of forgeries through the last long century or the “stratified and multi-faceted forgery culture” recently depicted by Oscar White Muscarella<sup>3</sup> what we are here concerned with. Our purpose is to describe the spurious Mesopotamian artifacts that found their way into the Museu Bíblic of Montserrat (Barcelona), aware of the fact that no collection of ancient Near Eastern antiquities (or, for that matter, any other antiquities) is complete without a number of fakes.

In the course of preparing the complete catalogue of cuneiform inscriptions in the Museu Bíblic of Montserrat, we found it convenient to publish the usually unjustly neglected forgeries that “complete” each and every important collection such as this one. It is not only that such pieces can teach us “the values and perceptions of those who made them, and those for whom they were made”, as stated by Mark Jones in the introduction to the British Museum exhibition catalogue *Fake? The Art of Deception*.<sup>4</sup> As will be shown in what follows, some examples present signs and sequences of signs quite correctly copied, and even reproduce original texts today lost. At least as significant for the history of cuneiform fakes is the

1. E. J. Banks, “Spurious Antiquities in Bagdad”, *AJSL* 21/1 (1904) 60-62.

2. E. Unger, “Fälschungen”, *RIA* 3 (1957), 5-9.

3. O. W. Muscarella, *The Lie Became Great. The Forgery of Ancient Near Eastern Cultures*, Groningen 2000.

4. M. Jones, “Why Fakes?”, in id. (ed.), *Fake? The Art of Deception*, London 1990, p. 11.

(not uncommon) fact that two of the tablets were published as genuine, and that the most anomalous or odd object (so-called “Unikum”) in the collection was so far exhibited in the museum gallery.

In view of the small number of forgeries, especially as compared to the number and quality of the genuine pieces, it will also be clear that P. Bonaventura Ubach, the founder and builder of the Museu Bíblic, had a special sense to detect forgeries, despite the fact that he was no expert in cuneiform. In his still unpublished diary (*Dietari de viatge per les terres de l'Iraq: 30 de juny de 1922 – 4 de novembre de 1923*), for example, he wrote down on May 12, 1923, that during his stay in Mosul he was offered some clay tablets for sale, but that he immediately recognized them as spurious “by simply touching them”.<sup>5</sup> What we cannot know is whether the tablets he found highly suspicious and refused a few days earlier in the area of Kirkuk (May 7) were real forgeries or exemplaries of the hitherto unknown “stylish” Nuzi script (the native dealer threatened P. Ubach that he would then “either sell them to the Germans or ship them to the Baghdad Museum”). As a matter of fact, we believe that about half of the few forgeries housed in the Museu Bíblic were acquired before his important trip to the Holy Land and beyond. Indeed, two of them (MM 1 and MM 2) were published by P. Anton Deimel (as examples of “eine neue Keilschriftart”) in 1920.<sup>6</sup> On account of their museum number and because the first list of objects exhibited in what was to become the Museu Bíblic of Montserrat in April 1911 included “two cuneiform tablets”, it is possible that these two fakes were purchased by P. Ubach during his first trip to Palestine between 1906 and 1910. But it is also possible that they belonged to the group of about 200 tablets he acquired in Rome, perhaps in the very Biblical Institute where he stayed from 1913 to 1924 together with P. Deimel.

The cuneiform forgeries in the Museu Bíblic of Montserrat include seven clay tablets, two of them lenticular-shaped, five clay barrels, two stone bowls, and a figurine. For the sake of completion, mention should also be made of a new head of Gudea that was donated to the museum long after the travels of P. Ubach, to be thus included in the apparently ever-increasing corpus of modern imitations of Gudea sculpture.<sup>7</sup> As far as the inscribed objects are concerned, the cuneiform characters are well drawn in a number of cases; in others, however, the signs are far from good imitations of original inscriptions (so that it is difficult to say whether our photographs reproduced below show the pieces in the “right” position). The forger of the clay tablet MM 441, for example, was undoubtedly acquainted with the Mesopotamian script and copied from some Neo-Babylonian royal inscription the sequence of signs *ha-di-iš-na-ap* he repeated in each line of the “reverse”. The signs have presumably been taken from the sequence of words *hadiš naplis(-ma)* found in a number of inscriptions of Nebuchadnezzar (note that in almost all the lines in the alleged reverse only the last wedge of the sign HA is reproduced). Other pieces also evidence some acquaintance with the script or with an original inscription on the part of the forger. The author of the odd amulet-like female figurine, for example, drew quite correctly the signs or parts of signs (in so-called Old Babylonian monumental script) inscribed on the tablet. The signs, however, are clearly taken at random (note the predilection for the “sign” GA, and the palindrome in line 5). The forger of the inscribed fragment of a bowl (MM s/n 2) also seems to have imitated some Pre-Sargonic votive inscription from

5. For this and other references to the story of the collection and museum, see R. Díaz i Carbonell, “Origen y vicisitudes históricas de la colección de textos cuneiformes del Museo de Montserrat”, in M. Molina and I. Márquez Rowe (eds.), *Tabulae Montserratinae. Estudios de catalogación del Museo de Montserrat (Barcelona) dedicados al Padre Guiu Camps con ocasión de su 80 aniversario* (= AuOr 15, 1997), pp. 11-20.

6. In the first issue of the journal *Orientalia* (1920, pp. 56-57, Plates I-IV). How often has a modern forger succeeded in fooling a scholar! For the field of Assyriology, see especially the important and interesting report by Erle Leichty, “A Remarkable Forger”, *Expedition* 12/3 (1970) 17-21; see also C. B. F. Walker, *Cuneiform*, London 1987, pp. 59-60.

7. Before we proceed any further we wish to heartily thank P. Pius Tragan, current curator of the Museu Bíblic of Montserrat, who not only did not refuse our request to publish these controversial pieces but even encouraged us to carry out the present study.

Girsu (note the reading <sup>d</sup>Ama-geštin-an-<na> of the first line). Concerning the forgery of clay tablets, it should be mentioned that MM 1, MM 441 and the lenticular-shaped fragment MM s/n 3 (the latter inscribed only with BI signs) turn from right to left. As for the barrels, MM s/n 4, MM s/n 5 and MM s/n 6 were undoubtedly made by the same expert hand.

What needs to be stressed now is that the cuneiform collection of the Museu Bíblic does not only house extraordinary texts such as a fragment of the Sumerian Gilgamesh epic or the Akkadian story of Atrahasis, but also an exceptional forgery of an Ur III text. MM 488 is a faithful imitation of an original record, so faithful that it is today possible to reconstruct the “Vorlage” (which was not included, for obvious reasons, in the edition of Neo-Sumerian administrative documents by M. Molina).<sup>8</sup> The size of the tablet, the way it turns and the signs inscribed on it are extraordinarily well reproduced. Naturally there are clear anomalies: some signs present an unusual number of extra wedges, and the edges of the tablet are filled with signs of the IR or NI-shape that make no sense, as though the forger would have liked to give the object a more genuine air.

The original tablet imitated by the author of MM 488 is now lost, but we have been able to reconstruct it to a considerable extent. This has been possible thanks to a closely related document published by H. de Genouillac in 1909 (*HAV* 139 3).<sup>9</sup> What is somehow ironical is that our fake has helped to restore a broken passage of *HAV* 139 3. This text, coming from the archives of Girsu, is preserved on a tablet to which are stuck some fragments of its original envelope. Although de Genouillac’s copy does not allow us to reconstruct the full text beyond doubt, we propose the following transliteration and translation (*e* = envelope; *t* = tablet):

### **HAV 139 3**

1e 3 gu<sub>2</sub> 6 5/6 ma-na / 2 2/3 gin<sub>2</sub> siki (tug<sub>2</sub> lugal ?)<sup>10</sup>  
 2t [x g]u<sub>2</sub> 30+8 1/3 ma-na / 1 2/3 gin<sub>2</sub> siki-mug  
 3t 600+240+50 la<sub>2</sub>-1 sa gu  
 4t si-i<sub>3</sub>-tum niĝ<sub>2</sub>-kas<sub>7</sub> AK  
 r.1t ki Lu<sub>2</sub>-uš-gi-na  
 2t kišib Ba-gu-gu  
 3t su-su-dam  
 4t ĝiri<sub>3</sub> L[u<sub>2</sub>-<sup>d</sup>Ba]-ba<sub>6</sub>  
 5t+e iti še-sa[g<sub>11</sub>-ku<sub>5</sub> u<sub>4</sub> x] ba-zal  
 6t+e mu 'x' [...] / ba-du<sub>3</sub>-[ta<sup>?</sup>]  
 7e [iti .... u<sub>4</sub>] 15 ba-zal  
 8e [m]u ma<sub>2</sub>-gur<sub>8</sub>-mah ba-dim<sub>2</sub><sup>1</sup>-[še<sub>3</sub><sup>?</sup>]

8. M. Molina, *Tablillas administrativas neosumerias de la Abadía de Montserrat (Barcelona). Copias Cuneiformes, Material per il Vocabolario Neosumerico* 18, Rome 1993; id., *Tablillas Administrativas Neosumerias del Museo de Montserrat. Transliteraciones e Índices*, Aula Orientalis - Supplementa 11, Barcelona 1996 (with an Appendix by H. Waetzoldt: *Siegelliste*).

9. H. de Genouillac, “Tablettes d’Ur”, *Hilprecht Anniversary Volume: Studies in Assyriology and Archaeology dedicated to Hermann V. Hilprecht upon the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of his Doctorate and his Fiftieth Birthday (July 28) by his Colleagues, Friends and Admirers*, Leipzig 1909, p. 139 No. 3.

10. “tug<sub>2</sub> lugal” can not be seen in the copy of H. de Genouillac. The suggested presence of these signs is based on his reference to “laine à vêtements”, qualité royale” in the commentary.

## Seal

- 1 Ur-<sup>d</sup>Lamma  
 2 dub-sar  
 3 dumu Lu<sub>2</sub>-diğir-<sup>r</sup>ra<sup>21</sup>  
 4 ugula [(x)]

“3 talents, 6 5/6 minas, 2 2/3 shekels (= c. 93.5 kg) of wool (for high quality garments), [x] talents, 38 1/3 minas, 1 2/3 shekels (= c. x+19.2 kg) of low quality wool; 889 bundles of linen: balance carried forward.

Bagugu has received it from Lu’ušgina and will have to return it.

Under the authority of Lu-Baba.

(Balanced account) from day [x], month XI, year 4/5/6 of Šu-Suen,<sup>11</sup> to day 15, month [x], year 8 of Šu-Suen.

Seal: Ur-Lamma, scribe, son of Ludiğira<sup>?</sup>, overseer (...).”<sup>12</sup>

The text thus records the obligations of Bagugu towards the central administration of Girsu, after the balance of his account was completed for a period concluding in the eighth regnal year of Šu-Suen.

The fake kept at the Abbey of Montserrat was copied from a tablet that probably belonged to the same dossier, the envelope of which being already lost. In the following transliteration, where for obvious reasons we have omitted the numerous paleographic anomalies, figures should not be taken seriously.

**MM 488**

- 1 1 gu<sub>2</sub> 30+6 2/3 ma-<na> / 1 5/6 gin<sub>2</sub> 2 še siki-mug  
 2 600<sup>?</sup>+10+3 2/3 sa gu  
 3 si-i<sub>3</sub>-tum nig<sub>2</sub>-kas<sub>7</sub> <AK>  
 4 ki Lu<sub>2</sub>-uš-gi-na  
 5 Mu-RI<sup>?</sup>-na... šu<sup>?</sup> ba<sup>?</sup>-ti<sup>?</sup>  
 r.1 su-su-dam  
 2 ġiri<sub>3</sub> Lu<sub>2</sub>-<sup>d</sup>Ba-ba<sub>6</sub> / dub-sar  
 3 iti še-sag<sub>11</sub>-ku<sub>5</sub> u<sub>4</sub> 5 ba-zal  
 4 mu ma<sub>2</sub>-gur<sub>8</sub>-mah ba-/dim<sub>2</sub>-ta<sup>?</sup>  
 5 iti šu-numun u<sub>4</sub> 20 la<sub>2</sub> 1 ba-zal  
 6 (mu<sup>d</sup>I-bi<sub>2</sub>-<sup>d</sup>E)N.ZU<sup>?</sup> lugal-[še<sub>3</sub><sup>?</sup>]

“1 talent, 36 2/3 minas, 1 5/6 shekels, 2 grains of low quality wool; 613<sup>?</sup> 2/3 bundles of linen: balance carried forward.

MuRI<sup>?</sup>na... has received (?) it from Lu’ušgina and will have to return it.

Under the authority of Lu-Baba, scribe.

(Balanced account) from day 5, month XI, year 8 of Šu-Suen, to day 19, month IV, year 1<sup>?</sup> of Ibbi-Suen<sup>?</sup>.”

11. The copy shows at the end of reverse line 5, on the right edge, ba-zal, and ba-du<sub>3</sub> below. It is not clear whether these signs belong to the envelope or the tablet. Nevertheless, the year name could well be interpreted as “mu (us<sub>2</sub>-sa) bad<sub>3</sub> (mar-tu) ba-du<sub>3</sub> (mu us<sub>2</sub>-sa-a-bi)”, that is, year 4, 5 or 6 of Šu-Suen.

12. This could be the same seal impressed on the text *Orient* 16 87 129:5 (kišib Ur-<sup>d</sup>Lamma dumu Lu<sub>2</sub>-diğir-ra ugula; seal: Ur-<sup>d</sup>Lamma dumu Lu<sub>2</sub>-[diğir-ra]), whose owner would also be attested in *CT* 3 5 BM 18343:r.vii.4 (kišib Ur-<sup>d</sup>Lamma dumu Lu<sub>2</sub>-diğir-ra ugula).

Unfortunately, line 5 of the obverse, where the name of the holder of the account should be recorded, makes no clear sense. The suggested interpretation (PN šu ba-ti) is just a guess; one could also think of a year name (mu ...) providing the deadline for balancing the account.

In any case, our text records the obligations of a person working for the administration of Girsu for a period consecutive to the one referred to in *HAV* 139 3. The fact that the goods transferred and the officials involved in the transaction are the same in both texts strongly suggests that *HAV* 139 3 and the “Vorlage” of MM 488 were drawn up in the same office and were kept in the same archive. The latter survived thanks to the skill of a forger who decided to make as faithful a copy as possible.

### *Catalogue*

**1** (MM 1): Clay tablet. 89x53x29. Published by A. Deimel, “Eine neue Keilschriftart”, *OrSP* 1 (1920) pp. 56-57, pl. I (photo), III (copy), IV (sign list). It turns right to left.

**2** (MM 2): Clay tablet. 87x59x24. Published by A. Deimel, “Eine neue Keilschriftart”, *OrSP* 1 (1920) p. 57, tab. II (photo), III (copy). It turns right to left.

**3** (MM 6): Clay tablet. 96x69x34.

**4** (MM 441): Clay tablet. 82x48x19. Signs and sequence of signs taken from a Neo-Babylonian royal inscription. It turns right to left.

**5** (MM 488): Clay tablet. 35x30x17. Forgery made on the basis of an administrative Ur III tablet. It turns bottom to top.

**6** (MM s/n 8): Clay lenticular tablet. 74x34.

**7** (MM s/n 3): Clay lenticular tablet. 53x75x28. Repetition of the sign BI. It turns right to left.

**8** (MM s/n 4): Clay barrel. 153x70. This and the next two pieces were made by the same forger.

**9** (MM s/n 5): Clay barrel. 157x65. See 8 above.

**10** (MM s/n 6): Clay barrel. 149x64. See 8 above.

**11** (MM s/n 7): Clay barrel. 104x53.

**12** (MM 3): Fragment of clay barrel. 77x58.

**13** (MM s/n 2): Fragment of a greenish stone bowl. 58x50x5. Forgery made on the basis of a votive inscription from Girsu, probably dated to the Pre-Sargonic period (line 1: most probably <sup>d</sup>Ama-geštin-an-na<na>).

**14** (MM s/n 9): Stone bowl. H. 40; Diam. of rim 129; Diam. of base 72.

**15** (MM s/n 10): Feminine gypsum amulet figurine. 105x46x17. The signs on the tablet imitate the Old Babylonian monumental script.

**Stone head of Gudea:** H. 218.



1 (MM 1)



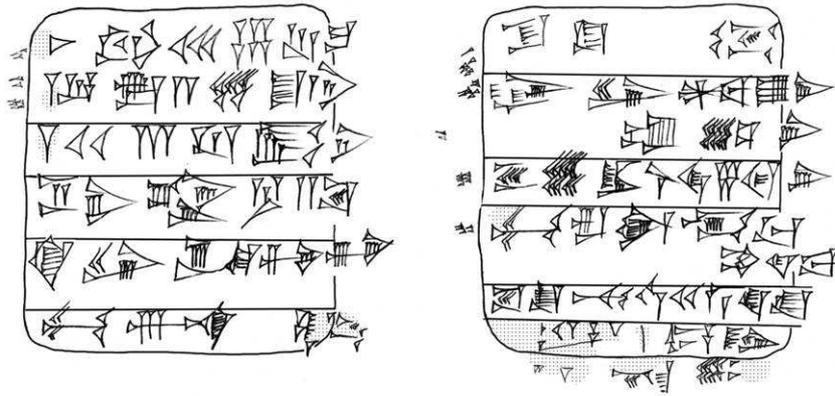
2 (MM 2)



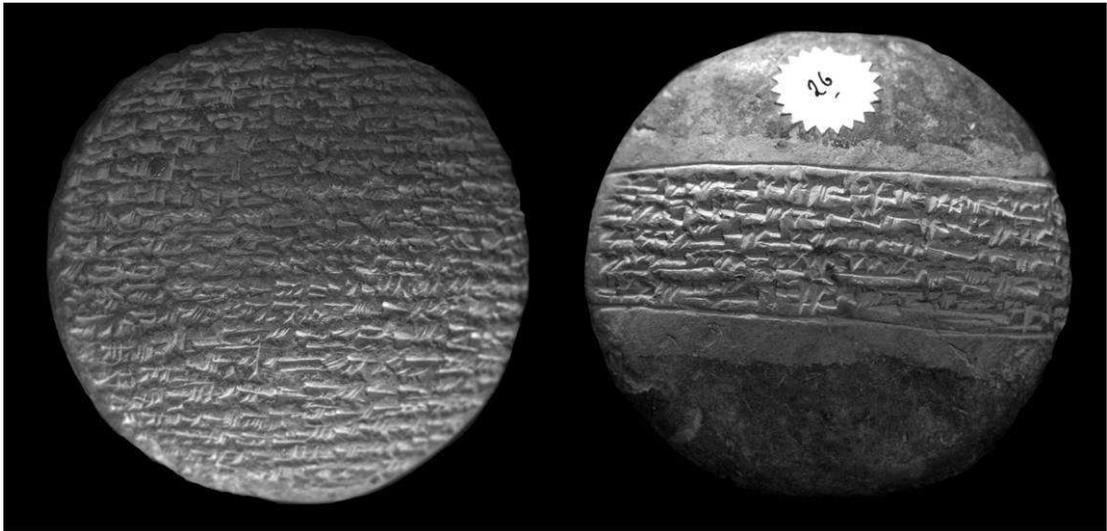
3 (MM 6)



4 (MM 441)



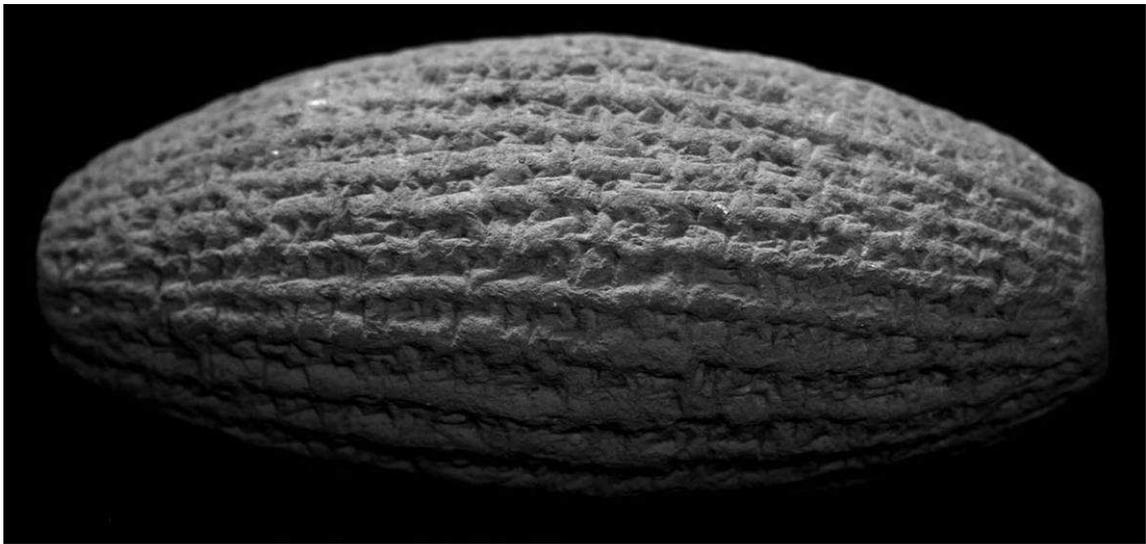
5 (MM 488)



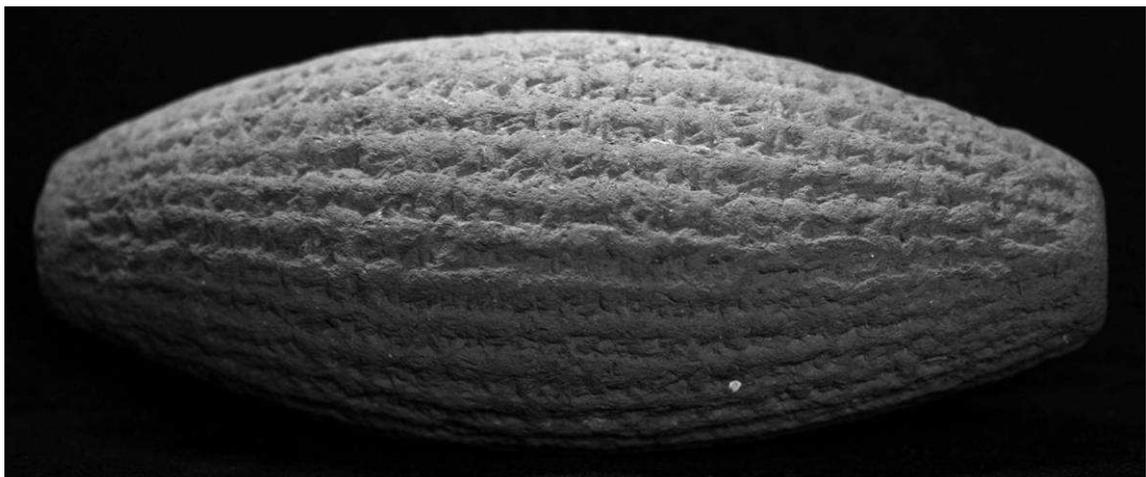
6 (MM s/n 8)



7 (MM s/n 3)



8 (MM s/n 4)



9 (MM s/n 5)



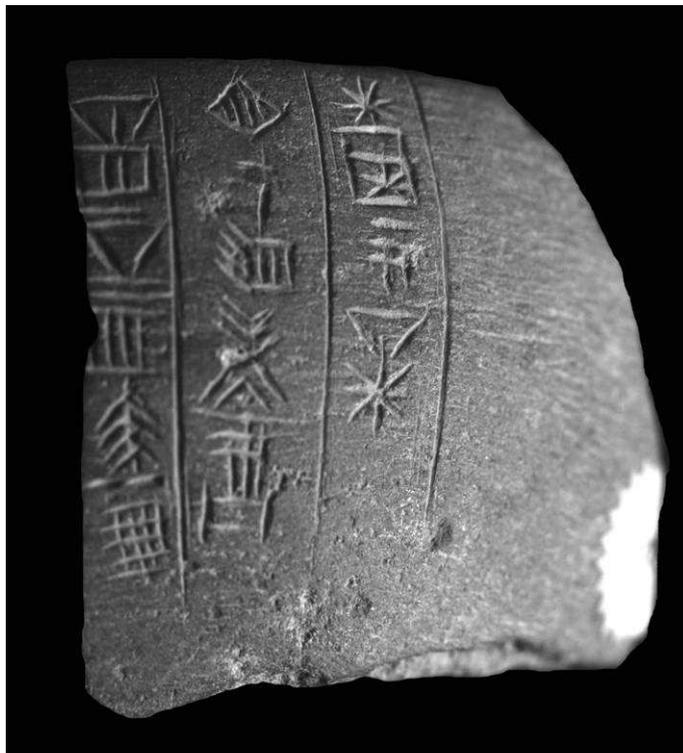
10 (MM s/n 6)



11 (MM s/n 7)



12 (MM 3)



13 (MM s/n 2)



14 (MM s/n 9)



15 (MM s/n 10)



Head of Gudea (Abbey of Montserrat)