

## Your Android tablet out of date? Our tablets are 4000 years old!

By Darlene F. Lizarraga

*This is Part Two of a developing 4-part series titled, "Digging in Storage," documenting the results of an independent study course, directed by Dr. Irene Bald Romano, fall 2013.*



ASM #68: Cuneiform Tablet  
Sumerian, Ur III period, 2056 BCE  
Tell Jokha, Iraq; ancient Umma, Mesopotamia  
Baked clay  
Height 3.58 inches (9.1 cm.)  
Width 2.04 inches (5.2 cm.)  
Thickness 0.91 inches (2.3 cm.)  
Purchased from Edgar J. Banks, 1914

### **COME SEE THIS TABLET AND OTHER OLD WORLD OBJECTS!**

ASM #68 and other highlights from ASM's Near Eastern, Egyptian, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman collections will be on display in the museum's lobby mid-December through mid-February. Stop by! Admission is always free with your CatCard!

Arizona State Museum is located just inside the UA's Main Gate at Park Ave and University Blvd.

[www.statemuseum.arizona.edu](http://www.statemuseum.arizona.edu)

Some among the younger generations might be surprised to know that tablets existed long before Apple and Microsoft created the high-definition, flat-screened versions so ubiquitous today.

ASM object #68 is a 4000-year-old cuneiform ***tablet*** from ancient Sumer. This type of tablet, in its day, was equally high tech and equally ubiquitous.

People living in ancient Mesopotamia—the area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers comprised of the empires of Assyria, Babylonia, Sumer, and often referred to as the “Cradle of Western Civilization”—developed one of the world’s earliest writing systems around 3100 BCE.

Mesopotamian scribes recorded daily events, trade, astronomy, literature, and even personal correspondence with wedge-shaped symbols known as cuneiform (Latin: *cuneus* = wedge) on tablets of soft clay which, after being inscribed, were either sun-dried or kiln baked. The writing utensil was probably reed, which could have either a pointed end or a squared-off end, and would be used either to scratch or press in order to produce the script.

Read today by only a handful of scholars worldwide, cuneiform represents several different ancient Near Eastern languages. In the case of ASM #68, the language is ancient Sumerian, decoded, transcribed, and published by Cornell Scholar Dr. David Owen and Dr. Ewa Wasilewska, professor of anthropology at the University of Utah. The

tablet records a court proceeding concerning the non-delivery of barley to the threshing floor of the ruler's palace. It is the oldest legal text in the State of Arizona.

All of ASM's 114 cuneiform tablets, from half a dozen sites in southern Iraq, record business transactions similar to ASM #68. The artifacts date from 2100-1800 BCE and together comprise, unquestionably, the oldest archive of literary materials in the state.

"ASM was established in 1893 in a period known as the Golden Age of Museums," explains Dr. Irene Bald Romano, ASM deputy director and an authority on the history of American museums. "The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time when encyclopedic institutions were being founded in urban centers around the country; a time when there was a keen interest in the lands of the Bible and in the Classical World; a time when educated gentlemen and ladies studied and were able to recite Latin and Greek. No museum in that period would have been considered complete without some sculpture, pottery, or other items from the ancient world."

Enter Edward J. Banks, early 20<sup>th</sup> century traveling cuneiform salesman.



Really.

Called an "entrepreneurial roving archaeologist," the colorful and larger-than-life Edgar James Banks (1866–1945) was a consultant for Cecil B. DeMille's biblical epics and one of the real-life figures on whom the fictional character of Indiana Jones was based. More precisely, Banks was an American diplomat and author, in addition to being an adventurer, antiquities enthusiast, amateur archaeologist, and eventually, university professor.

While serving as American consul in Baghdad in 1898, Banks acquired thousands of cuneiform tablets (some eventually proving quite significant) from a dealer in Istanbul and directly from locals who had dug at many sites in central Mesopotamia. According to Dr. Wasilewska, who is presently working on a Banks biography, "he imported at least 11,000 such relics."

By 1909, Banks was back in the United States, now professor of Oriental languages and archaeology at the University of Toledo. He earned his reputation as an "entrepreneurial roving archaeologist" by lecturing throughout the country. His entertaining and no doubt embellished adventure-filled tales inspired the sale of cuneiform tablets along the way. Purchasers were museums, libraries, universities, and private collectors.

ASM purchased 105 tablets from Banks in 1914.

Caretaker of these and millions of ancient objects at ASM is Mike Jacobs, curator of archaeological collections. Jacobs says the cuneiform tablets remain popular and often-accessed items. The tablets and the museum's other ancient Near Eastern "documents"

were last featured in 2009 in an exhibit titled *Writings out of Time*, displayed at the UA's Special Collections/Main Library, curated by Professor Beth Alpert Nakhai of the Arizona Center for Judaic Studies.

And so, to wrap up this story as it began—tablets of the digital age are really not very different from their ancient cuneiform ancestors—both portable human inventions, constantly upgraded technology, created and used specifically to record and communicate knowledge, activities, transactions, and stories. Ever driven by the need to record and communicate, and always with an eye toward doing it faster, better, and more effectively, humans always have and always will develop and evolve the devices to continue to do just that.

**Find more information about cuneiform tablets:**

Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (CDLI): <http://cdli.ucla.edu/>

The British Museum: <http://www.mesopotamia.co.uk/writing/index.html>

**More by and about Edgar J. Banks:**

*The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World* (1916), by Edgar J. Banks.

"To the Summit of Mount Ararat," by Edgar J. Banks, published in *Open Court*, Vol. 27, 1913, pages 398-410.

[http://www.noahsarksearch.com/The\\_Explorers\\_Of\\_Ararat\\_1912\\_Edgar\\_Banks.pdf](http://www.noahsarksearch.com/The_Explorers_Of_Ararat_1912_Edgar_Banks.pdf)

*The Forgotten Indiana Jones: Professor Edgar J. Banks and the Lost Everything*, by Ewa Wasilewska. Publication pending. <http://www.ewas.us/>

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