

Tsouparopoulou Lecture

Christina Tsouparopoulou, Research Associate at the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Cambridge University, presented a lecture entitled *What Can These Tiny Clay Tablets Tell Us About Ancient Drehem?* on Jan. 31, 2005, as part of the Horn Museum lecture series. Ms Tsouparopoulou was at Andrews University to study the cuneiform tablets from the Mesopotamian site of Drehem which are part of the collection at the Horn Archaeological Museum.

Located on a branch of the Euphrates River, about 10 km southwest of Nippur in modern Iraq, Drehem (ancient Puzrish-Dagan) was established as an administrative distribution center during the 39th year (2057 BC) of the reign of Shulgi. The site remained in operation for 40 years, producing a significant portion of the Neo-Sumerian cuneiform tablets of the Ur III Dynasty, along with the cities of Ur, Umma, Nippur, and Gisha.

As an archaeological site, Drehem has never been properly excavated, though numerous illicit excavations during the 1880s-1920s, have occurred. The existing corpus of tablets was collected during these illicit digs, including those



Christina Tsouparopoulou.

currently housed at the Horn Museum. It has been estimated that there were originally over 60,000 tablets in the Drehem archives, but only about 15,000 are known today. In the absence of archaeological excavation, these clay tablets, written in cuneiform script and in the Sumerian language, provide the only clues to this site's ancient role.

The site of Drehem played a major role in the accounting and distribution of animals throughout the kingdom of Ur III. The tablets track the transactions whereby animals were collected, transported, and distributed. Collection usually fell into one of three categories: private donations by wealthy individuals, payment of government taxes such as the bala tax, and

booty collected from military campaigns. There are many references to animals taken from the Amorites. Once collected, the animals were then distributed throughout the kingdom. The majority were sent to kitchens to feed priests, officials, troops, and government workers. The best animals were used as sacrifices to the gods. It has been estimated that ca. 70 animals were sacrificed daily.

The predominance of animal accounting in the Drehem tablets has led most scholars to assume that the site was a stockyard. Tsouparopoulou contests this view, suggesting rather that it was an accounting center through which most animals never passed. To support her claim, she cites the tablets themselves,

which often mention animals sent by the priest of a temple in a far-off city being used as a sacrifice in that particular temple. It is unlikely that an animal would be transported across the country only to be recorded and sent right back. Also, the numbers of animals recorded would have required a large workforce to care for and manage the animals at a central facility, and there is little evidence of this at Drehem. Still, since excavations have never been carried out, and many of the tablets from the archive are no longer available, further evidence is required to adequately determine the role of this site, which was unquestionably important to the Ur III economy. (Darrell J. Rohl)

