

Barry L. Eichler

ASSOCIATE
CURATOR-IN-
CHARGE,
BABYLONIAN
SECTION

BY DEBORAH I.
OLSZEWSKI

A FASCINATION WITH THE human condition and the problems that society attempts to solve is the driving force behind the research and teaching of Barry L. Eichler, Associate Curator-in-Charge of the Babylonian Section at Penn Museum. His close readings of ancient texts on Middle Eastern clay tablets provide insights into issues of societal

control, law, and morality, many of which still resonate today.

As an undergraduate at Yeshiva University in New York City from 1956 to 1960, Eichler spent his junior year in Israel, where he studied Biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts, visited archaeological excavations, and examined items of material culture. These included epigraphic records written in cuneiform—the wedge-shaped script used in ancient Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian writing. In Israel he developed an awareness of the importance of integrating Biblical studies with the world of the ancient Near East.

Following his college graduation, Eichler completed a year at the Bernard Revel Graduate School at Yeshiva University and then entered the Ph.D. program in Oriental Studies at the University of Pennsylvania in 1961. As the leading institution in integrating the separate fields of Biblical and cuneiform studies, Penn provided Eichler the opportunity to pursue a comparative perspective in his study of ancient Near Eastern societies. Under the mentorship of Ephraim Avigdor Speiser, Samuel Noah Kramer, and Moshe Greenberg, he completed his Ph.D. thesis on Mesopotamian laws of debt and security in 1967.

Following a year-long post-doctoral position at Yale University, where he worked with Jacob Finkelstein on Mesopotamian law, Eichler returned to Penn in 1968 as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Oriental Studies and an Assistant Curator at the Museum. In 1974, he became an Associate Professor in Near Eastern Languages and



Civilizations and an Associate Curator at the Museum. In 1982, Eichler founded Penn's Jewish Studies Program, which he chaired until 1995.

Eichler is a cuneiformist—a scholar who studies and translates cuneiform texts written on clay tablets with a stylus using a wedge-shaped script. The documents he examines, written in Akkadian and Sumerian, date to the 2nd and 1st millennia BCE and illuminate the history and culture of Mesopotamia and its periphery. His teaching emphasizes those aspects of the texts that explore the human condition. This past spring he offered a course on the diplomatic correspondence from Mari (a site located in modern Syria near the Euphrates River) which documents Hammurabi of Babylon's rise to power around 1775 BCE. These Akkadian letters also describe the relationship between Shamshi-Adad, an older contemporary of Hammurabi and founder of the Old Assyrian Empire, and his two sons. The older son, like his father, was a fearless warrior and excellent administrator, ruling the eastern empire from Ekallatum. In contrast, Shamshi-Adad's younger son was a fun-loving person who enjoyed the good life and spent much of his time cavorting with women in the palace at Mari, from which he ruled the western empire. The personal correspondence found at Mari between father and sons reveals the father's frustrations in teaching his younger son the impor-

tance of self-discipline, well-planned military strategy, and skilled administrative supervision. The tension between the father's need to discipline his son and his fear of alienating him with harsh criticism is tangible. The personal interactions in these letters speak to the human condition, transcending time and geography—they could be a story told today.

Ancient Near Eastern socio-legal institutions are one focus of Eichler's research. Legal texts are significant indicators of societal values because they document the regulation of social behaviors that a society considers important and acceptable. By reading between the lines one can see which values are protected and enforced by being elevated from social norms to laws. Since societal values change over time, changes in the law are a valuable guide to the development of social behavior. For example, in the modern world, law and morality are generally seen as separate domains, with law rooted in judicial authority and morality in a personal sense of obligation. In the ancient world, however, these concepts were integrated by rooting them in a religious worldview. In a recent study on law and morality in the ancient Near East, Eichler compared the ancient and modern worlds and pointed out that some modern debates generated by advances in medical technology—such as issues involving the right to die (a moral issue)—are being codified by society today into laws to facilitate decisions made by families, doctors, and others. This represents a full-circle return to the integration of law and morality as seen in ancient societies. The past is not as remote as might be thought.

Eichler's studies have documented the universality of societies' experiments in addressing issues of behavior, whether through law, morality, or an anguished father's pleas to his son. His current and future research will continue to mine these ancient texts for insights that speak to all humanity. 🏠



Top, Mari and Ekallatum were two of the major cities of Mesopotamia during the reign of Shamshi-Adad in the 18th century BCE.

Above, this example of a cuneiform text contains the Laws of Lipit-Ishtar, ruler of Isin (ca. 1930 BCE). It predates the Mari letters and the famous law collection of Hammurabi, king of Babylon, by 150 years. The Laws of Lipit-Ishtar were "discovered" in the Museum in 1947.

DEBORAH I. OLSZEWSKI is an Adjunct Associate Professor in Penn's Department of Anthropology and a Senior Research Scientist in the Museum's European Archaeology Section.