

## Notes From The Hill

*Editor's note: This column, which examines the relationship between WKU academic disciplines and collections, exhibits, and programs of The Kentucky Museum and Library, welcomes as guest columnist Professor Ronald A. Veenker of the Department of Philosophy and Religion. Dr. Veenker was undoubtedly the first visitor of the museum's "Curiosity Hall" to discover by chance the possible significance of a Mesopotamian clay tablet on display among other rare souvenirs once collected by Kentuckians. Now under close scrutiny by the archeological world, the tablet is expected to unlock the secrets of the ancient - - and only recently discovered - - Mesopotamian city of Ebla.*

### Unlocking the Mysteries of Ebla

*By Dr. Ronald A. Veenker, Professor of Religion, Department of Philosophy and Religion*

Scholars have been reading and translating Mesopotamian clay tablets for nearly 150 years. Of the thousands of documents discovered, only about 20 percent contain what one might call "literature." The greater part of the cuneiform (a Latin word meaning "wedge-shaped" writing) legacy is made up of economic texts, i.e., receipts and records held in the archives of government offices.

Excavations by the University of Chicago in the 1920s at several sites near ancient Ur and Nippur (near the Persian Gulf in extreme southern Iraq) turned up literally thousands and thousands of economic documents. Edgar J. Banks, an official on the dig, took it upon himself to disseminate these treasures throughout the United States in an effort to share the archeological wealth with everyone for the modest price of \$5.00 per tablet.

One of these Mesopotamian clay tablets now resides in The Kentucky Museum. It came from the collections of Allan Trout, a legislative journalist and popular columnist with the Louisville Courier-Journal. Trout's gray and mauve tablet, measuring about 1 ½ by 2 ½ inches, was accompanied by a letter from Banks certifying its authenticity.

#### "One in a hundred"

Because the Banks documents have been scattered across the face of the continent, it has become the task of scholars to locate them and publish photographs, drawings, and translations for other scholars. Only in this way can the political, social, and economic history of late third millennium B.C. Mesopotamia be recon-

structed. While only about one tablet in a hundred contains some information vital to the reconstruction, it happens that the Trout tablet in The Kentucky Museum is that one in a hundred: because it refers to a city named Ebla.



*Front view of the Mesopotamian clay tablet mentioning the ancient city of Ebla. The tablet lists rations given to foreign diplomats.*

*[Kentucky Museum photo by Reggie Dyche]*

The discovery of the site of the ancient Syrian city of Ebla in 1972 is perhaps the most exciting archeological find since the Dead Sea Scrolls. Until 1972, scholars were not really aware of the importance of this city which flourished around 2300 B.C. Now, all attention is focused on the question of what role Ebla played in Mesopotamian politics of the late third millennium. Was the power center southern Mesopotamia as we have always thought - - or should we now consider the possibility that Ebla and the northwest provinces were more influential?

#### Answering the Ebla Question

Trout's tablet helps us immensely in answering the question. Line 15 of the text reads: "me-gu-um ensi eb-laki", or "Megum, governor of Ebla." The title ensi (governor) was used by the kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2113-2006 BC) in referring to rulers who were vassals of the southern power center. The Trout text is the only tablet of all those thousands now available which uses the ensi in referring to a ruler at Ebla. From this fact we know that Ebla was not a dominant city-state, but under the control of the southern kings at Ur just prior to 2000 B.C.

The Trout tablet therefore helps put into perspective the entire economic power structure of Mesopotamia during the late third millennium B.C. - - and sheds light on what role Ebla played at that time. 🍀 🍀 🍀