Seleucid Tablets from Uruk in the British Museum

Text Editions and Commentary

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2 The Tablets: Writing, Format and *mise-en-page*

2.1 Sealed Tablets

2.1.1 Landscape-oriented

Most of the tablets that are the object of investigation have the typical format characterising juridical documents from Hellenistic Uruk: they are almost square, landscape-oriented, written on both sides, have thick edges housing the seals of the witnesses and of the individuals ceding rights, and the seal impressions are captioned with the name of the seal-owner. The most common seal used is the metal finger ring; stone seals, both cylinder or stamp, might also have been used but they are difficult to detect: the habit of distinguishing between the two types referring to them as un-qa vs. na_4 .kišib was in fact no longer practised after the early Hellenistic period, when unqu became widely used. Besides seals, a few examples of fingernail marks are also attested.

As a rule, no landscape-oriented tablet in this collection is larger than 13 cm or longer than 10 cm. Small and medium size tablets are the most frequently represented, measuring on average 7.5-9.8×8.5-11; 3 very large and very small tablets are uncommon.

Table 2 offers a synthesis of the size ranges of tablets in this collection.

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Size	Length range	Width range	Type of texts	
XXS	less than 6.4	less than 6.8	1-S	
XS	6.4-7.6	6.8-7.9	1 P; 2 AL	
S	7.5-8.9	8.6-9.8	14 RE; 30 P; 1 AL	
М	8.3-9.8	10-10.9	18 RE; 21 P; 2 MIX	
M/L	9.5-9.8	11-12	3 RE; 4 P	
L	from 9.9	from 12	1 RE; 5 P; 1 MIX	-

Bigger tablets, the so-called L-size (see Table 3, below), are usually justified by an exceptionally long content, either due to the need for details in the description of the object of the transaction or to the fact that the transaction involves more than one item (thus, e.g., No. 12-ALP records the sale of arable land and prebends; No. 85-P and No. 71-P are multiple prebends contracts; Nos 52-P and 109-P concern food prebends whose constituents are detailed in the contracts; No. 63-RE records the sale of a property whose description is divided into 4 different plots). Smaller tablets (XS and XXS-size), conversely, include standard basic prebend sales and contracts recording the sale of arable land.⁴

- 1 Wallenfels 1994, pp. 2-4 and 1996, pp. 113-117. Altavilla, Walker 2016, pp. 17-20.
- 2 Fingernail marks appear on the right edge of **No. 4-P** and **No. 3-RE**. They are discussed below, in the commentary to the relevant tablets.
- 3 Details on the tablets' size may be found under each tablet's record in the Text edition section.
- 4 On the diplomatics of Hellenistic tablets, see Corò forthcoming a.

Table 3. Big tablets (L- size) and their content

Text No.	Content
85-P	multiple prebends
52-P	food prebend
71-P	multiple prebends
63-RE	composite real estate
	(4 measurements)
12-ALP	prebend + real estate
114-P	(too fragmentary to decide)
109-P	food prebend

2.1.2 Portrait-oriented

Only a couple of portrait oriented sealed tablets may be pinpointed within the collection. They date (or can be safely dated) to the early Seleucid period and are characterised by a typical Neo-Babylonian formulary (see Table 4, below) and by the use of dividing lines (not very common on landscape tablets, but see below 2.3.3).⁵

Table 4. Portrait-oriented sealed tablets

Text No.	Date	Content
42-RE	early Seleucid NB formulary	real estate
14-RE	early Seleucid NB formulary	real estate

2.2 Unsealed Tablets

2.2.1 Landscape-oriented

Only five tablets bear no seal impressions. Two of them (**No. 116-ADM**; **No. 117-ADM**) share the same extrinsic characteristics: they are almost flat, landscape-oriented, written on the obverse only using a slanting, inaccurate writing typical of the administrative documents that immediately distinguishes them from the rest of the collection. They both lack a date formula and consist of lists of personnel (carpenters and prebendaries in charge of the temple-enterer's service for two days, respectively).

Most unusual is **No. 52-P**: the tablet is an L-size contract recording the purchase of food prebends by L/AZI//EZ. While typical in all its details, the tablet is unsealed: the rationale for it might be concealed in the last lines of the texts that are broken and might refer to the fact that the document is a copy.

Table 5. Landscape-oriented, unsealed tablets

Text No.	Content	Writing	Format	
116-ADM	list of carpenters	obv. only	landscape; flat	
117-ADM	list of prebendaries	obv. only	landscape; flat	
52-P	division of property	obv. and rev.	landscape; thick	

5 Dividing lines are usually absent from landscape tablets; the few documented exceptions are discussed below.

2.2.2 Portrait-oriented

Two unsealed tablets, very different from one another, are portrait-oriented. The first, **No. 118-ADM**, is an XS size, *Ziegelformat* tablet, written with an accurate, though slightly slanting script; despite its small size, it shares much of the quality of standard contracts but its layout is completely different. The writing runs, in fact, on the obverse (flowing also onto the right edge), continues for one line on the lower edge, and then on the reverse and the left edge. The text is separated into paragraphs by rulings. It has no seal impressions, nor witnesses, scribe name and date. Short lines are all left-aligned. Judging from its content it must be interpreted as a sort of temple registry for prebends.

No. 119-ADM is a portrait-oriented, unsealed and irregularly shaped rectangular tablet, written on both sides. It bears a very atypical, poor writing, to the extent that it was originally believed to be a fake. The edges are uninscribed but marks are visible on both the right and left edges. The script is cursive and slanting (as in **Nos. 116-ADM and 117-ADM**); on the obverse rulings, sloping down towards the right, separate the text into paragraphs. The tablet might represent a memorandum (or a clay tag) of documents of different kinds held in a reed container.

With the exception of **No. 52-P**, the unsealed tablets have not much in common with the rest of the collection and they might be a reflection of the administrative functioning of the temple, on which we are in general relatively ill informed.⁶

Table 6. Portrait-oriented, unsealed tablets

Text No.	Content	Writing	Format	
118-ADM	administrative list	obv.+rev.+ Lo.e+Le.e.	portrait; thick	
119-ADM	list of documents	obv.+rev.	portrait; thick	

2.3 Language, Script and mise-en-page⁷

The tablets in the collection are written in the Late Babylonian dialect of Akkadian. As is typical of texts from Hellenistic Uruk, they are characterised by a number of variant spellings and anomalous renderings of logograms, as well as words written with mixed logo-syllabic spellings (for which see the commentary to text editions and chapter 8, below).

The script is in general elegant, the signs being usually accurately and neatly impressed on the surface, with vertical strokes in a clear upright position; writing lines develop over successive lines with regular small blank spaces in between, parallel to the horizontal axis of the tablet: this is a very distinctive feature of many of the economic tablets from Uruk dating to the Hellenistic period.

The reason for it has to be sought in the scribal environment whence the texts originate: it is in fact clear that many of the scribes who composed the contracts (and maybe, as I have shown elsewhere, some of the administrative texts, too) were also authors of literary tablets.8

Notwithstanding the overall impression of accuracy and carefulness, upon closer scrutiny different 'styles' can be detected among the tablets.9

A more cursive style is the result of different factors:

- signs tend to be slanting towards the left (as, e.g. in No. 1-S);
- 6 On the few administrative documents from Hellenistic Uruk and their significance see below, ch. 7.
- 7 The following paragraphs summarise the main characteristics of the tablets in the BM collection; the terms used here and in the commentary to the text editions refer to the classification used in the present author's study of the diplomatics of Hellenistic tablets from Uruk: see Corò forthcoming a.
- 8 See Pearce, Doty 2000; Corò 2015 and ch. 8, below.
- **9** A comprehensive analysis of the handwriting and scribal characteristics of all the Hellenistic tablets from Uruk is the object of a study by the present author, currently in preparation; here I will limit myself to a few general observations on the tablets in the BM collection.

- 2. writing lines are slanting with respect to the horizontal axis of the tablet (either upwards, as, e.g., in **Nos. 48-P, 57-RE**, or downwards, as is the case in **No. 61-P**);
- 3. signs belonging to the same line are squeezed (as in **No. 89-P**);
- 4. signs belonging to the same writing line are not regularly aligned over it with respect to the horizontal axis (e.g., **Nos. 65-RE; 66-P; 68-P, 69-P, 73-P**).

Conversely, a group of 'more elegant' tablets features signs the heads of whose oblique and vertical strokes are particularly accentuated (these include, among others, **Nos. 40-P; 48-P; 49-P; 71-P**);

A number of the tablets registered with BM numbers starting 114- are characterised by particularly thinly written signs that could result from the use of a particular (perhaps not of reed?) stylus (see e.g. Nos. 86-RE; 95-RE; 96-RE, 97-RE, 99-RE, 100-RE, 100-RE, 101-RE, 102-RE, 104-RE).

A couple of the few extant administrative texts are easily recognisable for their slanting script.

No script other than cuneiform is used on the tablets in the BM collections that are published here, with the exception of Aramaic letters in the seal impressions (as in Nos. 20-P; 23-P; 26-P; 29//30-P; 31-P; 37-RE; 40-P; 45-RE, 47//48-P; 49-P; 53-P; 56-P; 58//59-RE; 74//75-RE; 82-P).¹⁰

2.3.1 Obverse and Reverse

Standard tablets in the collection are written on both sides for a total number of 21-43 lines. Only one tablet (**No. 14-RE**) has the exceptional number of 46 lines (but one should note that it is portrait-oriented).¹¹

The script in general is continuous on the obverse, occupying all the surface of a tablet (also flowing onto the right edge to avoid word interruption). The obverse may contain from a minimum of twelve to a maximum of twenty-four lines (reaching twenty-five in **No. 14-RE**), corresponding to the operative section of the contract that usually continues on the reverse for up to fifteen lines. Only rarely, in fact, does the operative section end with the obverse.

Deviations from the two main formats may depend, for example, on the use of professional names instead of a clan name or of the regular indication of filiation, on the need to account for the presence of women consenting to the transaction that takes place in the contract, on exceptionally long names, and less frequently on specific scribal idiosyncrasies.

The date formula of the tablet always aligns with the bottom of the tablet, occupying its last two lines: thus, a blank section of variable length may follow the list of witnesses in case this is not big enough to fill in the space between the end of the text and the date formula. Few examples exhibit a date formula developed over one or three lines instead of two, and in just a couple of cases it is located on the upper edge of the tablet.

2.3.2 Edges

Seal impressions develop along all four edges of the tablets, running from left to right: on the upper, lower and left edges are impressed the seals of the witnesses to the transaction; they tend to be regularly distributed on the surface of the edges and are accompanied by the names of the witnesses.

The caption un-qa (only rarely na_4 .kišib is used in its place: see above) is placed above the impression. In the case of vertically-oriented almond-shaped impressions, the caption is arranged one syllable to its left and the other to its right, with very few exceptions; when the impression is either horizontal or circular/round, the caption extends on top of it. The caption un-qa marks each single impression: only rarely does the scribe omit it (as shown, e.g., on the left edge of **No. 59-RE** where five seal impressions are marked by four captions only).

Under the seal impression stands the name of the seal owner, corresponding to one of the individuals listed in the witness list. Only the first name of each witness is recorded in the caption.

¹⁰ On seals with Aramaic inscriptions in the corpus of economic documents from Hellenistic Uruk see recently Mitchell, Searight 2008, pp. 251-262 and Pearce 2010 (with earlier bibliography).

¹¹ Only well preserved tablets for which the total number of lines may be securely established are considered here.

There is no clear preference for the alignment of the seal impressions on the surface; they may be centred on the surface, or right-aligned or left-aligned.¹²

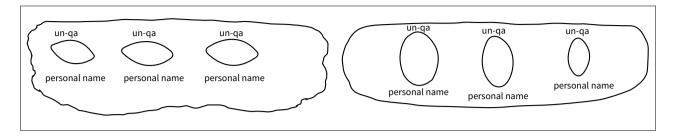


Figure 1. Caption arrangement for horizontal and vertical seal impressions. Schematisation based on the Lower edge of **No 53-P** (left) and **No. 92-RE** (right)

The right edge is reserved for the seals of those ceding rights to the object of the transaction. The impressions on this edge may vary from one (that of the seller) to two (seller and guarantor) or more (especially when more than one seller is involved in the transaction). Only rarely is the seal of someone ceding rights located elsewhere or, conversely, that of a witness occupies the right edge. Impressions on the right edge tend to be centred on the surface (see Fig. 2, below). Each seal impression is here topped by the caption un-qa + the name of the seal owner, while under it is placed the indication of the individual's role in the transaction and of the object of the transaction itself (e.g. "the seller of this house"; "the guarantor").

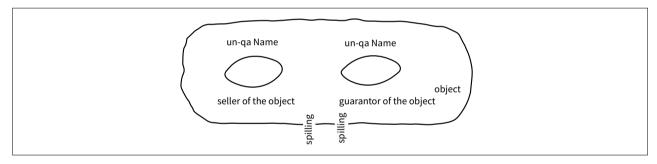


Figure 2. Caption arrangement on right edge. Schematisation based on No. 79-RE

Sometimes the right edge also houses signs flowing over from the obverse, with the result that the layout differs from the norm. Thus, in **No. 71-P** (see Plate LXXI) the seal captions are somehow squeezed in order not to interfere with the signs belonging to the main body of the text (from the right edge), and so are those on top of the seal impression, in order not to overlap with the impression. Something similar may be noticed for **No. 48-P** (Plate XLVIII): the text spilling over from the right edge occupies a substantial portion of the surface of the right edge between the first and second seal impressions, to the extent that the name of the owner of the first seal is written to the left of the seal impression, occupying a sort of unusual extra intermediate line; the caption was clearly written after the seal was impressed, since its last sign overlaps with the impression. Only an otherwise standard tablet (**No. 52-P**) exhibits unusually empty unsealed, edges, while **No. 6-RE** features an anomalous blank right edge.

2.3.3 Rulings, Blank Spaces and Other Markers

Dividing lines are not widely used: exceptions are represented by the two portrait-oriented tablets dating to the early Seleucid period **No. 42-RE** and **No. 14-RE** and a couple of standard contracts that include the registration clause (e.g., **No. 56-P**; a schematic representation of this text in offered in § 8.1., Fig. 11, below). There, dividing lines are used to separate text chapters or to introduce the witnesses; here they are used to frame the registration clause itself. As was noticed elsewhere, the use of dividing lines to frame the registration clause in those contracts exhibiting it is optional, but in general framed examples are more common than unframed ones.¹³

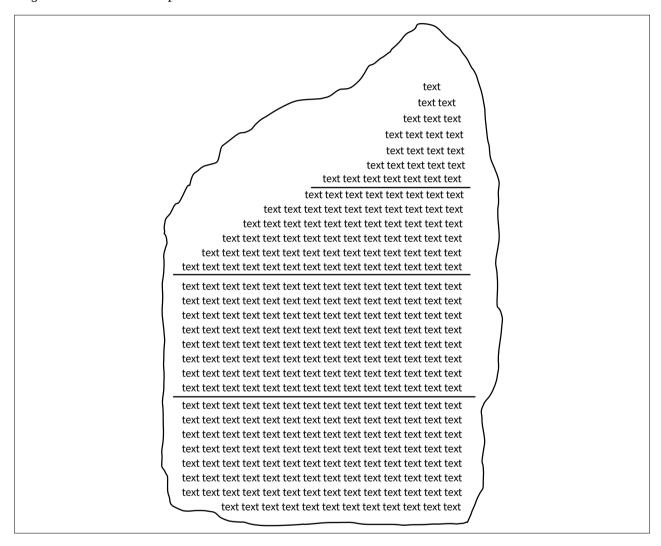


Figure 3. Schematic representation of the use of dividing lines in No. 14-RE

The date formula, usually developing over two lines on the reverse, is in general aligned to the bottom of the tablet, as we have seen before. Thus, when the text of the contract including the witness list does not fully fill in the surface of the reverse, a blank is placed in between. The empty space may correspond to one or more lines of writing (see Fig. 4).

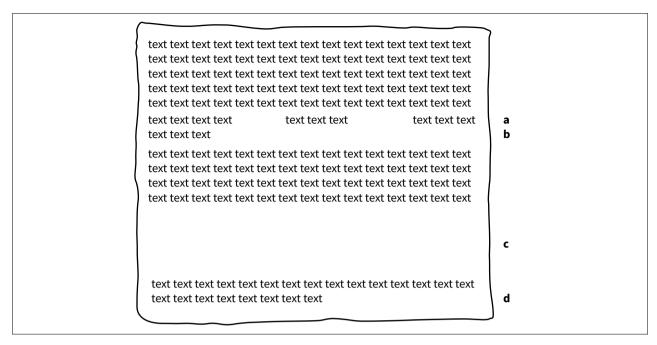


Figure 4. Schematic representation of the possible use of blank spaces on tablets' reverse

Blank spaces may also stand at the end of the last line of a text section, as the result of left-alignment: e.g. after $mukinn\bar{u}$, when the witness list begins in the next line (Fig. 4, **b**): only in a few cases is this 'caption' not part of the first line of the witness list (as, e.g., in **No. 43-P** and **No. 64-P**). But there is apparently no specific pattern for when it is not.

A blank space may also stand at the end of the operative section of the contract, before the witness list (e.g., **No. 9-P**; see Fig. 4, c). Sometimes, in this position the scribe prefers to leave a small blank space between words as if 'justifying' the text (this is done, however, by spacing a word from another word, not sign by sign: Fig. 4, a). The same applies to the last line of the date formula (and of the tablet), where either a blank may stand to the right of the name of the reigning king(s) (Fig. 4, d) or blanks stand between the date and the name(s) of the reigning king(s) in order to distribute the text evenly on the line (e.g. **No. 48-P** and **No. 31-P**).

In a couple of cases the reverse of the tablet opens with a blank area preceding the witness list, where the contract formulation itself ends with the obverse of the tablet (e.g., **No. 2-P** and **No. 4-P**; see below, Fig. 5).

In addition, **No. 63-RE** is the only extant tablet in the collection where a blank precedes the names of the points of the compass in the description of a property, with the result that the reader's attention is immediately caught, the blank functioning as a visual marker for a list.

Sometimes scribes seem not to feel at ease with end-of-the-line blanks and tend to fill in the empty space by stretching the tail of the last horizontal wedge (or simply adding an extra horizontal line to its right), more frequently at the end of a text section (No. 79-RE; No. 28-P), but we have examples also at the end of any single line of the witness list (see e.g. No. 36-RE), or between the name and the patronymic or clan affiliation (No. 27-RE). This might be interpreted as a way to avoid later (unauthorised) additions.

Blanks are placed between the 'name columns', where the witness list is tabulated (see Fig. 6), and on the edges, to separate the different impressions (here, blanks are the result of the justified or centred layout of the seal impressions on the edges).

Whatever the general arrangement of the witness list, its first line may or may not be tabulated. Where it is not, this is due to the fact that the scribe writes the name of the first witness in line with the caption 'witnesses'. As for the following lines, when the lists are tabulated, they are generally 'regular', i.e. all the individuals listed have a 'regular' three- or four-tier filiation. Variations may occur, but they represent exceptions. This need for "regularity" in the *mise-en-page* has a special

Figure 5. Schematic representation of No. 4-P

significance when an individual has no clan name. Individuals acting as witnesses and not bearing a full filiation are uncommon in the documents. The clan name may be substituted by the professional title or only the first name and patronymic are recorded. When these individuals appear in tabulated witness lists, the professional title may either stand in the same column as the clan names or an empty space is left; the trend is, however, to relegate such individuals to the end of the list.

A very interesting and unusual example is represented by **No. 27-RE** (see the commentary to the tablet, below and Fig. 6).

The text runs continuously on the reverse; the witness list begins on the fourth line of the reverse (Rev. 20, where the name and patronymic of the first witness follow the caption $mukinn\bar{u}$). Conversely, a blank separates the clan name from the patronymic and stands to the right, thus representing the first line of a (hypothetical) third column of text.

First names, patronymics and clan names are then arranged in the next lines in three columns until W9, with the exception of W2 and W8, that exhibit an extra name in the onomastic chain, with the result of breaking the visual harmony of the list.

In both cases, the scribe in order to save space uses the logogram a instead of dumu and omits \check{sa} (thus introducing a mistake). The list does not end with W9: four more witnesses are listed in the next lines; the writing is squeezed in order for the four names to be housed in just a couple of lines, with the final signs of each of the two lines also flowing onto the edge. A half-line empty space divides the date formula from the list of witnesses. The date formula too includes anomalies: it is written in one line only, and this could be the reason why the king's name is written omitting the sign for the vowel i, an uncommon (shortened) orthography. Moreover the scribe traces lines to fill in the blanks between the columns of the witness list when present (the same arrangement can be observed in YOS XX 30, but the scribe and type of document are different).

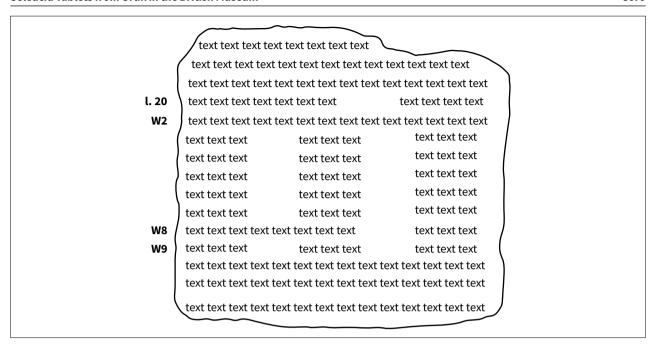


Figure 6. Schematic representation of the reverse of No. 27-RE

2.4 Duplicates

A distinct feature of the Seleucid tablets from Uruk is the presence among them of a substantial number of duplicates, i.e. tablets that are exact copies of one another, seals included: it is thus clear that they are not simple copies but that each retained its own juridical value.¹⁴

Among the documents under investigation, twenty tablets are pairs of duplicates both housed in the BM; six more have a duplicate in collections housed elsewhere. I will call the first group 'in-house' duplicates, the second 'external' duplicates. The sixteen discrete documents for which a duplicate is known represent approximately 13% of the collection.

2.4.1 'In-house' Duplicates

Table 7. Tablets in the BM: 'in-house' duplicates

Text No.	Collections	Туре	Reg. clause	Actors	Date
47-P//48-P	1856-9-3//1914-4-4	sale <i>kirû hallatu</i> prebend	yes (both unframed)	1 seller to L/AZI//EZ	74 SE
55-P//54-P	1856-9-3//1914-4-4	sale <i>eb</i> prebend	yes (1 n-a; 1 framed)	2 sellers to AZI/L//EZ	78 SE
29-P//30-P	1913-4-16//1914-4-4	sale tab prebend	no	1 seller to L/AZI//EZ	55 ES
62-P//61-P	1913-4-16//1914-4-4	sale tab prebend	yes (1 n-a; 1 unframed)	AZI/L/AZI//EZ	86 SE
73-P//72-P	1913-4-16//1914-4-4	sale tab prebend	no	1 seller to 1 buyer	106 SE
90-P//91-P	1913-4-16//1914-4-4	sale <i>ašipūtu</i>	unknown	1 seller to AZI/AU/AZI//EZ	125-137SE
10-P//11-P	both 1914-4-4	sale mubannûtu	unknown	1 seller to his wife	37 SE
87-P//88-P	both 1914-4-4	sale gerseqqûtu	no	1 seller to 1 buyer	120 SE
74-RE//75-RE	both 1920-6-15	property, Adad temple	n-a	fisherman to sepīru	109 SE
111-M//112-M	both 1920-6-15	quitclaim mixed content	n-a	1 seller to a woman	162 SE
100-RE//101-RE	both 1920-6-15	property of Anu <i>br</i> at the wall of Anu	n-a	worker in clay to magallaya	156 SE

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of the problem of duplicates among the contracts from Uruk dating to the Seleucid period see Corò, forthcoming a. On the question of the juridical value of the contracts written on clay see Clancier 2005 and Joannès 2007. See also Clancier 2011, pp. 239-247.

'In-house' duplicates (see Table 7) are distributed homogeneously within the three major groups of tablets acquired by the BM, namely the 1913-4-16, the 1914-4-16 and the 1920-4-16 date-number groups. Only four pairs are tablets both belonging to the same acquisition group (namely two to the 1914-4-4 and two to the 1920-6-15). I will further call them 'internal' duplicates; the six extant pairs consist of tablets one of which is in the 1914-4-16 group and the other belongs either to the "Loftus group" or to the 1913-4-16 group.

With the only exception of the tablets in the 1920 group, all others have a duplicate in the 1914-4-4 group. Duplicate tablets coming from Loftus' excavations and those in the 1913-4-16 collection (with the exception of **No. 72-P//73-P**) involve a member of the Lâbâši family as the buyer.

2.4.2 Duplicates Housed in Other Museums

Six tablets have duplicates in collections not housed in the BM: three of them are kept at Yale, one at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, one is in Birmingham and the sixth is part of the Louvre collections.

Table 8. Tablets in the BM: external of	duplicates
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Text No.	Collection	Туре	Reg. clause	Actors	Date SE
78-P//YOS 20 85	1913-4-16// NCBT	sale <i>eb</i>	no	1 seller to Bēlessunu	115
09-P//YOS 20 17	1914-4-4//NCBT	sale eb	no	3 sellers to AZI/NI/AZI//EZ	35
49-P//YOS 20 37	1914-4-4//NCBT	sale eb	yes (both framed)	3 sellers to L/AZI//EZ	66-77
68-P//VDI 1955/47	1913-4-16//Erm.	sale nuhatimmūtu	no	1 seller to NI and AU/AZI/L//EZ	90
109-P//Iraq 59 38	1920-6-15// Birmingham 1982.A	sale multi-prebend	no	1 seller to his wife	162
94-P//TCL 13 244	1914-4-4//AO	sale <i>kirû hallatu</i> prebend	no	2 sellers to AZI/AU/AZI//EZ	132

Again, with the only exception of **No. 109-P** (//Iraq 59 38), all documents record transactions involving a member of the Lâbâši family.

Duplicate tablets tend to correspond to each other; however, while this is always the case for their content, the total number of lines on the obverse and reverse and their internal distribution on the surface may vary, as well as the size of the tablets and sometimes also their general layout (so that it is possible that they belong to different layout types).¹⁵

Textual variants are rare and consist of differences such as the use of a logogram instead of the syllabic writing of a word (e.g. KI vs. *it-ti* in the pair **No. 47-P//No. 48-P**), inversions in the onomastic chain (e.g. Lâbâši is described as "the son of PN, the buyer" in **No. 47-P** and "the buyer, son of PN" in the duplicate), or minor omissions (the same individual is described by a four-tier filiation in one exemplar and by a three-tier one in the other). Seals are usually impressed on the edges in the same position and order on both exemplars.¹⁶

¹⁵ See, for example, the pair of duplicates Nos. 100//101-RE, discussed below (ch. 8, with Fig. 13).

¹⁶ On duplicates in the Yale collection see Wallenfels 1984, pp. 4-5.