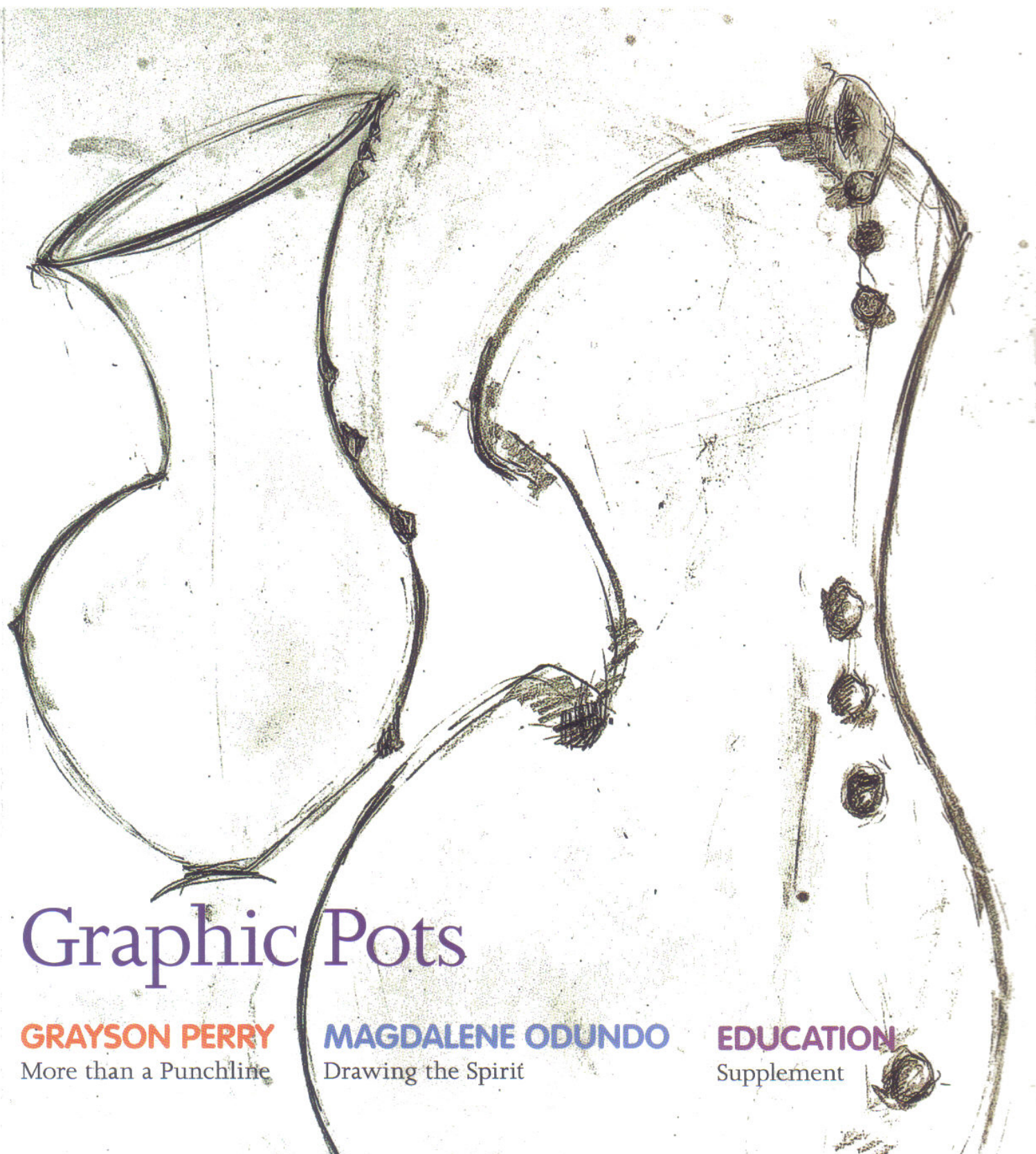


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Graphic Pots

GRAYSON PERRY

More than a Punchline

MAGDALENE ODUNDO

Drawing the Spirit

EDUCATION

Supplement

Texts from the Past

Clay was a material for recording writing in the ancient world. Conservator Zahed Tajeddin tells us of his work on a recently opened 'envelope tablet'.

Cuneiform tablets are the earliest historical documents. They were in use between the end of the fourth millennium BC and the first century AD. They are a major source of information on different aspects of daily life in the ancient world of Mesopotamia, today's Syria and Iraq.¹ They not only include administrative texts, business accounts, contracts, legal documents, and records of public buildings, but also letters, hymns, prayers, myths, legends, proverbs, recipes, scientific and religious records, school exercises, lexical texts, and much else besides.

THE USE OF CLAY Cuneiform documents are made of clay, which was an abundant resource, and depending on the period and their function, they were produced in all sizes and shapes. They could be large or small, and range in shape from round, square, or pillow-shaped with rounded edges, to cones, barrels, cylinders, or multifaceted prisms. In some cases, they were also made in the shape of animal organs. The clay used for tablets is generally light in colour so as to highlight the script. It includes fine temper to enable drying without cracking and, in order to allow for clear incisions, it contains no large grit or fibre.² The majority of tablets were left to dry in the sun before use and only the most important documents were fired.



2

CUNEIFORM HISTORY Cuneiform script, the oldest writing system, was invented around the end of the fourth millennium BC in ancient Mesopotamia. It evolved in response to the bureaucratic needs of ancient urban settlements. Archaeological evidence shows that writing began with the scratching of signs onto clay in order to transform ideas and sounds into a registered means of communication. These signs slowly developed over an extended period of time; what began as pictographic and abstract became more explicit, indicating sounds and grammatical elements. The word cuneiform comes from the Latin word *cunes*, which means wedge. It describes the wedge-shaped impression that was left on leatherhard clay by using a specially shaped wooden or reed stylus.

Sumerian is the earliest language to employ cuneiform script. From the middle of the third millennium BC the Akkadians in southern Mesopotamia began using the cuneiform system to write their own language, as did the people of Ebla in Syria. By the early second millennium BC Sumerian ceased to exist and Akkadian became the official language of the Old Babylonian dynasty. The texts of this period are described as Babylonian, which also became the language of international correspondence. The Babylonian language remained in use as late as 530BC. Philologists distinguish between Old, Middle, and Neo-Babylonian texts, and in addition to these are the separate dialects used by the Kassites and the Assyrians. During the second and first millennium BC, other languages employing clay tablets and the cuneiform system included Elamite, Hittite, Hurrian, Mittanian, Ugaritic, Urartian, Persian, and Aramaic. By the time of Alexander the Great, although some documents were still being written in cuneiform, the system was increasingly replaced by Aramaic script. The last cuneiform tablets date from around AD75. Except for the use of an alphabetic cuneiform system



1

They give an insight into that ancient society, their lives and traditions

1 Pictographic script listing food rations. The symbol of a human head with a bowl is the verb to eat. Late Uruk Period 3300-3100 BC, H4.5 cm. 2 Summary account of silver for the governor in late Sumerian language,

probably from Shuruppak c2500 BC, H8.5cm. 3 School tablet inscribed on front by the teacher and on the back copied by the pupil, Old Babylonian c1900-1700 BC, Ø7.62 cm. 4 Tablet after treatment. Images courtesy British Museum

Footnotes 1 Walker, C B F, *Reading the Past: Cuneiform*, (London: Published for the Trustees of the British Museum by British Museum Publications, 1987) 2 Nissen, H J, Damerow, P, and Englund, R K, *Archaic Bookkeeping*, (London and Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993)

A special acknowledgment goes to Assyriologist Prof W G Lambert for the study and translation of the envelope tablet. **Zahed Tajeddin** is an archaeologist, conservator, and sculptor currently working on his PhD research into ancient faience technology at Westminster University and the Institute of Archaeology, both in London. Email zahed1@hotmail.co.uk

at Ugarit in Syria, the syllabic cuneiform system largely maintained its identity and appearance for over 3000 years, its development and modification made by various nations and scribes.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS Cuneiform tablets are generally found in archival groups buried in archaeological sites. The soil in Mesopotamia often contains a high concentration of salt that over time leaves deposits in the clay tablets. These salts can cause considerable damage: they absorb the humidity in the air and expand, damaging and, in some instances, breaking the clay tablet. Often the salt effloresces at the surface of the tablets and forms salt crystals that obscure the writing and cause flaking. Therefore conservators have developed a method of treatment that can be applied to the fragile and damaged tablets. This involves submitting



3

the tablets to delicate firing in order to stabilise them, followed by a desalination process in order to expose the cuneiform text and make it legible.

NEW OPENING As a conservator of ancient clay tablets, I was recently commissioned to work on a rare type known as envelope tablets. These are basically clay documents or letters enclosed within clay envelopes. Although many tablets were originally concealed in envelopes, only a small number survive and remain unopened. This envelope tablet is rectangular in shape, closed, and sealed. In the tablet I worked on, one side was damaged exposing one corner of the clay document inside. The surface of the envelope was largely covered with salt crystal formations, which obscured some of the written text. During this operation I had to break open the clay envelope, revealing the text enclosed within, an exciting undertaking



4

as the tablet emerged into the light again after 4000 years of darkness. After completing the treatment, the pieces were given to a specialist scholar to study and translate the text. His report came back with the long-awaited information:

The tablet with the envelope bears a Sumerian inscription. It is an administrative document dating to the fourth year of Shu-Sin, king of Ur in South Mesopotamia within the Third Dynasty, circa 2034BC. The tablet inside and the envelope both bear the same inscription, which relates to a delivery of woollen cloth within the official bureaucracy. The translation reads:

1 Talent, 13 minas of wool: royal-grade cloth

1 talent of wool, second grade

10 talents of wool, third grade

Ali-Nisu, supervisor of the weavers has received [the above] from

Shulgi-Mishar and Lu-Shulgira. It has been entered into his accounts.

Year: Shu-Sin, king of Ur built the west wall, (called) 'That which keeps the Tidu at bay'.

The envelope also bears impressions of the scribe's cylinder seal, showing a deity seated on the right, the bare headed scribe standing in front, and behind him an intercessory goddess.

The purpose of the envelope was security; anyone could chip off the envelope, but while the tablet inside was the final court of appeal, it would have been virtually impossible to put a new envelope over a dried-out tablet. In addition, the original scribe's seal was required for the envelope.

Cuneiform tablets remain a major source of our knowledge of the history of Mesopotamia. As we saw with the envelope example, they give an insight into that ancient society, their lives and traditions. The envelope tablet brings a lost moment back to life, allowing us to envisage shepherds and their herds, weavers and merchants, officials and scribes, and a king who ruled, built, and left behind a legacy. □