Mid–6th century B.C.E. was a dark time for the empire of Babylonia. Persians and Medes were threatening in the east, and the king mysteriously abandoned his famed capital of Babylon for a remote oasis in the western Arabian desert. Contemporary texts portray King Nabonidus as mentally unstable and complain that he forsook the prime Babylonian deity, virile Marduk, for the mystical cult of the moon god Sin, often portrayed as an old man with a long beard.

Those texts, written by Nabonidus’s clerical enemies, have been the only evidence of his claimed exile. Now archaeologists have found the first concrete signs that Nabonidus indeed lived in the oasis of Tayma, more than 1000 kilometers to the west of today’s Iraq, and they hope also to uncover why this obscure oasis played such a pivotal role in history. Academics familiar with the Middle East say that the Tayma dig itself, in sparsely settled northwestern Saudi Arabia, is a triumph of science over politics, given the difficulty of winning permits from the Saudi government for excavations by foreign teams.

Three years ago, Saudi researchers working near Tayma found rock inscriptions that mention an army of Nabonidus that battled local Bedouin. Then in December, a joint Saudi-German team found a piece of badly weathered stele, a stone slab inscribed with writing, which closely resembles other slabs associated with Nabonidus’s reign.

The slab originally would have stood for passersby to read, but the team’s fragment—60 centimeters (cm) wide, 50 cm high, and 11 cm thick—was later reused in building a wall. Only about a dozen lines of the stele are legible, but they indicate that Nabonidus made offerings to Babylonian deities—including Marduk—in the form of carnelian, lapis lazuli, and censers of gold, according to a translation by Assyriologist Hanspeter Schaudig of the University of Heidelberg in Germany. The find “is very valuable for our knowledge of history,” says philologist David Weisberg of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio. But he adds that the inscription “is quite damaged, and many lines are illegible,” so it will require more study.

The find is part of a larger effort to understand the complex trade routes that linked the ancient Middle East. Tayma lies at a critical juncture of the frankincense trade flowing north from Yemen and other routes to the Persian Gulf and Mesopotamia, and for millennia it offered travelers a respite from the desert. At the time of Nabonidus, the oasis included a city with a vast wall some 14 kilometers in circumference and a well 18 meters across, one of the largest on the notoriously dry Arabian Peninsula. The team, led by Ricardo Eichmann of Berlin’s German Archaeological Institute and Said al-Said, a professor at King Fahd University, has found 13 successive layers of occupation from the mid–3rd millennium to the early centuries of the modern era, showing a surprising continuity in urban desert life.

Although Babylonian texts mention that Nabonidus built a palace at the site, Eichmann says none has yet been found, but the team will keep looking when it returns to Saudi Arabia in November. Textual evidence found elsewhere indicates that Nabonidus was ill when he left Babylon and recovered during his decade in the desert. But German excavation director Arnulf Hausleiter speculates that his real motives could have been economic: By asserting control over an important trade city, Nabonidus may have been attempting to bolster Babylon’s flagging treasury. If so, the gambit failed. The texts say that the king returned to Babylon in 542 B.C.E. after a decade in exile, only to be overthrown by the Persian King Cyrus the Great 3 years later. Thus Mesopotamians lost control over their own rich territory—a control that was not fully regained until 2500 years later in the 20th century.

One of the most spectacular archaeological discoveries in history was Leonard Woolley’s excavation of the royal tombs of Ur in the late 1920s. The 16 graves included a “death pit” with sacrificed retainers and animals. Woolley believed the tombs were those of kings and their consorts, including the famous Queen Puabi, buried with a magnificent crown and other jewelry.

But one grave, tomb 1054, left Woolley perplexed. In the shaft 4 meters above the stone burial chamber was a cylinder seal inscribed with the word “lugal,” Sumerian for “king” or “ruler,” along with a name read as Meskalamadug and traditionally translated as “hero of the land.” In the stone chamber itself were a host of weapons, including a dagger at the side of the principal occupant. But there was one hitch: Woolley determined that the remains were of a woman. Scholars had long held that ancient Mesopotamian rulers, unlike their Egyptian neighbors, were always men. “That seal cannot be hers,” Woolley concluded in a 1934 publication.

The puzzle has obsessed two generations of researchers, who have come up with a variety of theories to explain it. Now Kathleen McCaffrey, a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, says that the most logical answer is the simplest: The seal and weapons did...
Without a skeleton, scholars may never definitively sort out the mysteries of tomb 1054. But the women of ancient Ur may have more to say in the near future: Researchers are now examining Queen Puabi's remains for clues to her genetic identity.

Looted Tablets Pose Scholar’s Dilemma

Few societies before our own were as obsessed with recording data as ancient Mesopotamia. After inventing the first script in the 4th millennium B.C.E., the Sumerian scribes used clay tablets to keep track of the most minute economic transactions as well as great myths such as The Epic of Gilgamesh that stir readers even today. The tablets have proved invaluable in understanding the hearts and minds of that lost world.

But the artifacts also have attracted collectors and antiquities dealers. Today, as many as 100,000 tablets a year are being ripped out of archaeological sites in war-torn Iraq and put on the international market, according to U.S. government estimates. By comparison, only some 300,000 to 400,000 likely existed in libraries and private collections prior to 1990, say scholars. So far, the number of stolen tablets confiscated or returned is minuscule: An FBI official said at the conference that fewer than 400 had been recovered recently by U.S. agents.

Should academics publish texts from cuneiform tablets that may have been looted? This thorny ethical question sparked the fiercest debate at the meeting and revealed a bitter split within the community. Some philologists say that given the scale of the looting, they are eager to salvage what data they can by translating and publishing texts. “You have an obligation to your science, to your data,” says Jerrold Cooper, a philologist at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, who says he would work with collectors who own tablets. “It makes no sense at all to condemn all publication” of potentially looted items.

But many archaeologists see the widespread looting in Iraq as an unalloyed nightmare and any involvement with potentially stolen tablets as aiding and abetting the destruction. At the meeting, a faction led by Michael Mueller-Karpe, a specialist in ancient metals at the Roman-German Central Museum of Mainz, Germany, proposed a resolution opposing scholarly involvement with tablets that may have been looted. “Scholars... are urged to refrain from providing expertise to the antiquities market and to private collectors, unless the artifacts in question can be proved to be neither excavated illegally nor exported without permission,” states the resolution, which was signed by 130 academics at a meeting after the conference officially ended. A number of scholars, primarily philologists like Cooper, refused to sign.

The different opinions do not always track disciplinary lines. Robert Adams, a retired archaeologist and former head of the Smithsonian Institution, surprised many participants at the opening session by allowing that no discipline should be expected to ignore vast amounts of new data, however it might have been obtained. (After taking fire from colleagues, Adams later clarified that he did not mean to condone the publishing of looted material but wanted to emphasize the complexity of the problem.)

Meanwhile, several philologists draw a distinction between working on existing collections and trafficking with dealers seeking to boost the value of tablets. Cooper, for example, says he would “not be comfortable” examining tablets owned by dealers.

But a few at the meeting do read recently acquired tablets for dealers, for free or for pay—an act that archaeologists maintain can boost the tablets’ value and reinforce the cycle of looting. Cooper says he hopes participants at the next conference will come up with a common ethical stance to guide scholarly actions.