

In Mesopotamia, as in Egypt, our knowledge of ancient history has come through two distinct, though related lines of research. One has been the excavation of the great mounds which covered ancient cities, study of their architecture, statuary, pottery, utensils, etc. The other has been the decipherment of the language and the study of the writing on the excavated tablets and monuments.

In Egypt the great mass of writing was done on papyrus a material about as durable as our best modern paper. Except for a comparatively small number of papyri buried mainly in tombs, the ephemeral³ writings of ancient Egypt have perished. In Mesopotamia no such convenient writing material was available. A substitute was found in clay tablets marked with wedge-shaped characters which we call "cuneiform". Although much less convenient than papyrus, and much more bulky, these tablets have the merit of great durability. The overwhelming mass of the writing of ancient Mesopotamia were preserved in the ruins of its cities.⁽⁴⁾ This includes contracts and ephemeral writings of individuals as well as important state documents. Many thousands of these tablets have been excavated and brought to museums. From them is possible to gain a far more precise knowledge of the culture and life of ancient Mesopotamia than can be gained from Egyptian writing for many aspects of the life of ancient Egypt. The only gap in this knowledge is the fact that in every age many of the commonest features of daily life are so well known that no one bothers to write about them. For the filling of this lack ancient pictures, bas-reliefs and statues often prove very helpful.

The cuneiform writing is a very complicated system. It was used to write many different languages. Its inventors were the Sumerians, a people speaking a language neither Semitic nor Indo-European, who controlled Mesopotamia during a large part of the third millennium B.C. (3000-2000) B.C.⁵ It was taken over and adapted by the speakers of a Semitic language which is now generally called Akkadian, which was spoken by the Assyrians and by the Babylonians. This language became the lingua franca of ancient diplomacy, and clay tablets inscribed with letters in Akkadian were used for correspondence even between Pharaohs of Egypt and kings of cities in Palestine, although neither party actually spoke it. Several hundred such letters were found ~~in Egypt~~ at