

SUGGESTIONS FOR BEGINNING THE STUDY OF CUNEIFORM

Careful distinction should be made between a language and a means by which a language may be represented in writing.

When cuneiform inscriptions were first discovered the bulk of them came from the Assyrian kings. As a result, for some decades the language was called "Assyrian" and the science was called "Assyriology."

Later, many inscriptions and tablets were found from the city of Babylon from a period prior to the Assyrian ascendancy, and others from a city known as Accad from a still earlier time. In view of this, the language common to these three areas is now generally designated as Accadian. The dialect found in Accad itself is designated as Early Accadian.

The inscriptions from Accad represent a form of the language that is much less regular than the later writings from Babylon. Since the most regular form of the language is that found in the laws of Hammurabi, these are often considered a good medium for beginning the study of cuneiform.

The Accadian language, particularly in the form used in the laws of Hammurabi, is so regular and systematic that it is far easier to learn than most other Semitic languages. Learning also is facilitated by the fact that it is often transliterated into the Latin letters with which we are familiar. The language has many similarities to Hebrew, even though the grammar differs from it in certain important respects. The cuneiform system of writing has been used for quite a number of different languages, but the overwhelming mass of material is in one form or other of the Accadian language.

There are four main types of cuneiform writing of Accadian: that used in Early Accadian, prior to the rise of Babylon; that used in Early Babylonian; that used in Assyrian, and that used in Neo-Babylonian writing. Since the Assyrian inscriptions were the first to be widely studied in modern times the commonly used sign lists have been based upon this form of the writing, which seems a bit simpler than the more ornate form used in Early Babylonian writings, or the somewhat different form used in the later Babylonian period after the destruction of the Assyrian empire.