

British School of Archaeology in Iraq

# LANGUAGES OF IRAQ

ANCIENT AND MODERN

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# Babylonian and Assyrian: A history of Akkadian

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## Introduction

Akkadian is the name now given to the ancient dialects of East Semitic. Semitic is the family of western Asiatic languages that includes, among other West Semitic tongues, Hebrew, Ugaritic, Aramaic, Arabic, Ethiopic and Amharic (all conveniently described by Bergsträsser 1983, Hetzron 1997). Because the first substantial discoveries of written Akkadian were made in the remains of Assyrian cities, Akkadian was known to its first decipherers as Assyrian. In due course scholars recognized two important facts that led to a change in terminology. First, it was seen that in the 2nd and 1st millennia an ancient descriptor of Mesopotamian Semitic was *akkadûm*, fem. *akkaditum* “Akkadian”. Second, it became apparent that for most of ancient history there were two principal varieties of Mesopotamian East Semitic, one spoken in Babylonia, the south of Iraq, and the other in Assyria, on the middle Tigris valley. These were then identified as Babylonian and Assyrian respectively and paired off on linguistic grounds as twin dialects of a single language, which for want of a better term was named Akkadian. Ancient Assyrian is not the same language as modern Assyrian, a term that denotes the eastern dialects of spoken Aramaic (neo-Syriac) still used by Assyrian Christians from Iraq and elsewhere.

A pairing of the dialects of Babylonia and Assyria, whether under the former name Assyrian or the current name Akkadian, does not reflect native usage, which knows no such common word for them. The ancients thought in terms of two separate languages. The term *akkadûm* “Akkadian” was used to refer to the East Semitic of south Mesopotamia, i.e. Babylonian, often in specific contrast to Sumerian, Assyrian or Aramaic. The ancient Assyrians called their tongue *aššurû* or *aššurāyu* “Assyrian”, often in opposition to *armāyu* “Aramaic”.

Though Babylonian and Assyrian are today treated as variant forms of Akkadian, they are sufficiently distinct in grammar and vocabulary that one could make a good case for speaking of them as separate languages, as the ancients did. On the other hand, they exhibit a parallel history in several aspects of their grammatical

Table 1. The range of documents written in Akkadian

1. Archival documents
  - a. Administrative lists and inventories
  - b. Receipts
  - c. Disbursements
  - d. Accounts
  - e. Business letters and memoranda
  - f. Private letters
2. Legal documents
  - a. Contracts, title deeds and wills
  - b. Juridical documents
  - c. Collections of laws
3. Royal documents
  - a. Building inscriptions
  - b. Royal annals
  - c. Royal grants and decrees
  - d. Treaties and diplomatic correspondence
4. Chronological and related texts
  - a. Date lists, king lists, eponym lists
  - b. Chronicles
  - c. Other historiographic documents
5. Commemorative and monumental inscriptions
  - a. Votive inscriptions
  - b. Funerary inscriptions
6. Liturgical and religious texts
  - a. Cult songs, hymns and laments
  - b. Temple rituals
  - c. Prayers
7. Divination literature
  - a. Omen compendia
  - b. Rituals, oracle questions and reports
  - c. Liver models
8. Astrological and astronomical literature
  - a. Omen compendia
- b. Astrological reports
- c. Astronomical diaries
- d. Astronomical tables and almanacs
9. Exorcists' lore
  - a. Apotropaic and prophylactic rituals
  - b. Charms, spells and incantations
  - c. Prognostic and diagnostic omens
  - d. Medical recipes and compendia
  - e. Calendrical omens, hemerologies and almanacs
10. Mathematics and surveying
  - a. Mathematical problem texts
  - b. Numerical tables
  - c. Maps and plans
11. Craft-related texts
  - a. Technical manuals
  - b. Horse-training texts
12. Pedagogical texts
  - a. Sign lists
  - b. Vocabularies
  - c. Encyclopedic lists
  - d. Glossaries
  - e. Grammatical tables
  - f. Commentaries and other scholia
  - g. Scribal exercises
13. Belles lettres
  - a. Mythological, epic and narrative poetry
  - b. Literary hymns and devotional poetry
  - c. Lyric and other poetry
  - d. Didactic poetry and prose
  - e. Wisdom literature
14. Folk literature
  - a. Proverbs and fables
  - b. Folk tales

development. This is especially noticeable in the declension of the noun and adjective, where first a loss of mimation and later a reduction in case marking occur at approximately the same time in both Babylonian and Assyrian. Synchronic evolution of this kind speaks for a close historical relationship.

In lexical terms Akkadian is one of the largest Semitic languages. It possesses a vast vocabulary of Semitic words augmented by borrowings from other languages, both Semitic and unrelated. During its long history the various dialects of Akkadian absorbed many foreign words from the several tongues with which, at one or other time and place, they shared speakers and writers. These were chiefly Sumerian, Amorite, Hurrian, Aramaic, Old Persian and Greek. The first four, especially, were much spoken in parts of the Akkadian linguistic area. Bilingualism in Akkadian and one of these other languages is a conspicuous feature of the linguistic history of ancient Mesopotamia.

The vocabulary of Akkadian is still in the process of elucidation, for while we now possess either complete or nearly so two exhaustive modern dictionaries (Wolfram von Soden's *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* and the *Assyrian Dictionary* of the University of Chicago), the exact meaning of many words last spoken two millennia ago continues to give difficulty. The process of refinement of our understanding of the Akkadian lexical stock will continue to exercise linguists and philologists for many generations. Akkadian was also a very long-lived language. Varieties of Akkadian were spoken in what is now Iraq from at least the middle of the 3rd millennium to the middle of the 1st millennium BC, and a written form of the language continued in use until the 1st century AD, perhaps even later.

A consequence of the long history of Akkadian, and the durability of the clay tablets on which it was written, is that we possess an enormous body of Akkadian texts. These texts fall into of all kinds of different categories and document a huge range of human activities and intellectual pursuits (Table 1). Three principal avenues of research stretch out before the Assyriologist as a result. First, the superabundance of letters and other archival documents permits the reconstruction of ancient institutions and societies with a detail that is impossible for many periods of more recent civilizations, including much of medieval Europe. The existence of multiple manuscripts of texts passed down in the scribal tradition holds out hope for the eventual recovery of the entire corpus of 1st-millennium Babylonian literature and Sumero-Babylonian scholarly achievement, alongside the earlier 2nd-millennium Sumerian corpus. Finally, the considerable variation in dialects of Akkadian over time and space (Table 2) offers lexicographers and historical grammarians almost unlimited scope for diachronic and synchronic linguistic study.

These prospects of new knowledge make competence in Akkadian an exciting tool to possess. It is not possible here to describe all avenues of research in Akkadian, nor to cover every aspect of Akkadian as a language. Others have written brief summaries of Akkadian grammar (Bergsträsser 1983: 25-49, Campbell 1991: 32-6, Buccellati 1997, Huehnergard and Woods 2004). One more would seem superfluous. Instead of adding to their number, it is enough here to draw attention to three salient

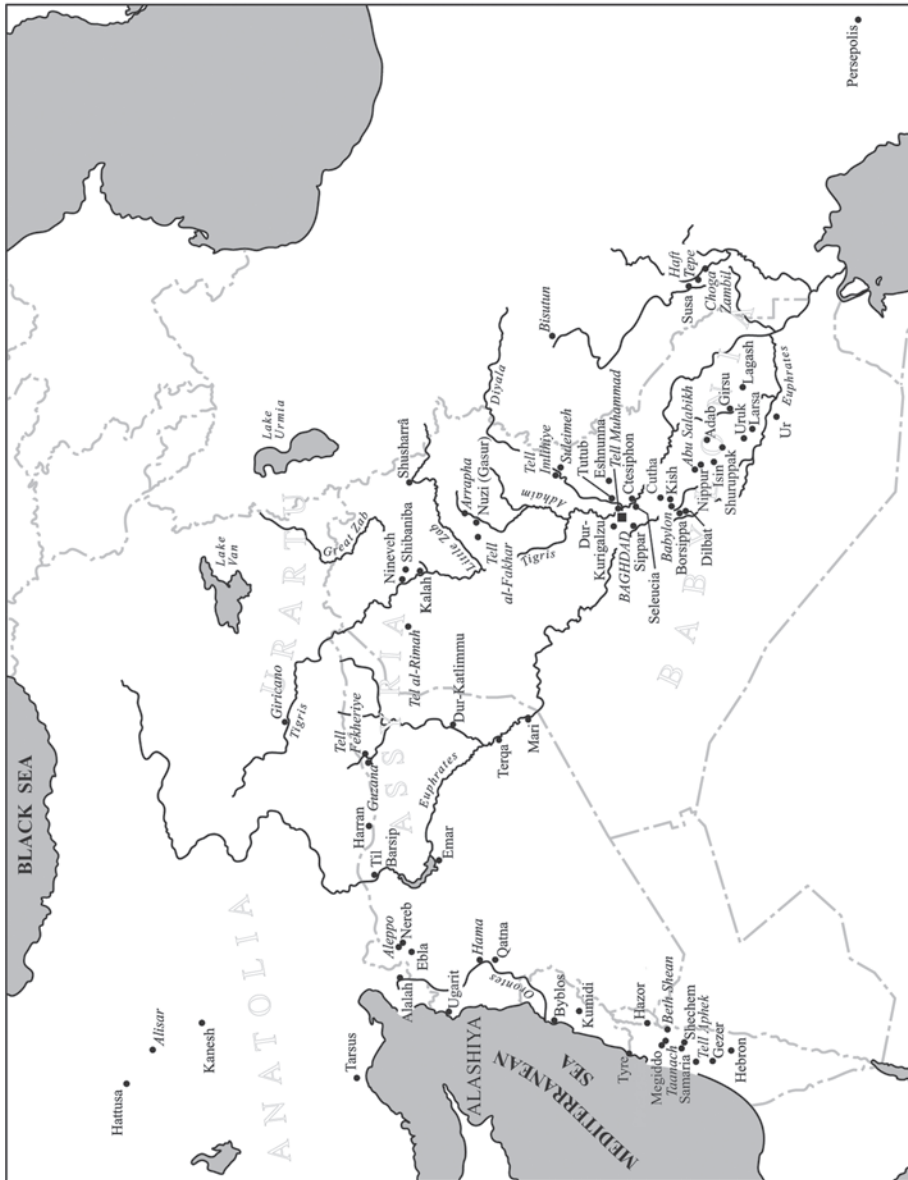


Fig. 3.1 Map of the ancient Near East to show places mentioned

features of Akkadian that distinguish it from most other Semitic: (a) the range of consonants is sharply reduced, probably under the influence of Sumerian, (b) word order in prose is subject - object - verb (SOV) as in Sumerian (Semitic is usually VSO), and (c) the verbal conjugations are put to uses different from their counterparts in other Semitic. Here the purpose is rather to examine the history and development of Akkadian based on current knowledge. What emerges is an account of the spread and usage of Akkadian: who spoke it, who wrote it, where, when and for what purpose.

This history is not definitive, however, for there is a caveat. Even in later periods, written forms of language tend to favour one variety of the language over another and so hide from us the full picture of dialectal diversity. When we also take into account the sporadic and uneven nature of the extant documentation, both in time and space, it will be obvious that any current history of Akkadian and its dialects will be provisional. New discoveries will force regular revisions.

### Akkadian and Akkade

The adjective *akkadûm* “Akkadian” derives from the place name Akkade (in older literature Agade). Akkade was the ancient capital of the dynasty founded by Sargon, whose kings were the first to make extensive use of written Akkadian. Its exact site has not yet been located on the ground but there is strong documentary evidence that it lay on the Tigris in the vicinity of modern Baghdad (McEwan 1982: 11-12, Wall-Romana 1990). Some have sought it further upstream (e.g. Westenholz 1999: 31-4) but an unpublished Old Babylonian letter from Mari records an itinerary that places Akkade ([*a-kà*]-*dè<sup>ki</sup>*) between the towns of Sippar (modern Abu Habba and Tell ed-Der) and Tutub (Khafajah) on the route to Eshnunna (Tell Asmar) (Charpin 1988: 150 fn. 68).<sup>1</sup> The direct route from Sippar to Eshnunna heads north-east to the Tigris and then up the river Diyala. This suggests a location for Akkade a little downstream of Baghdad, near the confluence of the two rivers. Since other evidence from Mari places Akkade at a river-crossing, it seems the strategic importance of Akkade lay in its control of a vital ferry over the Tigris.

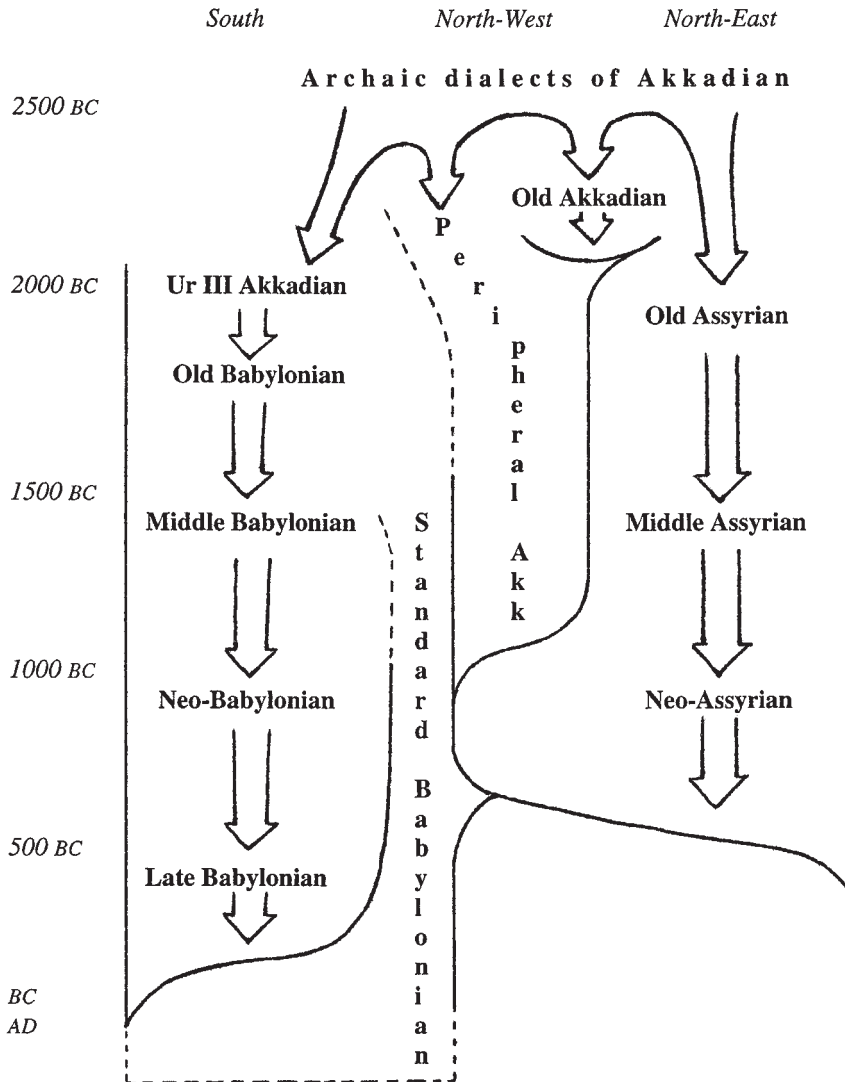
Akkade gave its name to the area around it, *mât Akkade* “the land of A.”; in Sumerian this country was called *ki-Uri* “the land of Uri”. Uri is a toponym that in Old Babylonian Akkadian appears as *Wari’um*. Warium was the land east and north of the confluence of the Tigris and Diyala rivers, later centred on the important city of Eshnunna. In the 18th-century royal archives of Mari the gentilic adjective *akkadûm* “Akkadian” refers most often (but not exclusively) to people from the kingdom of

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<sup>1</sup> The alternative restoration [*û*]-*pi<sub>3</sub><sup>ki</sup>* is orthographically improbable in this period, when the toponym Upi (Greek Opis) was written *ú-pí-(i)<sup>ki</sup>*.



Table 2. Time-chart showing the development of Akkadian



Eshnunna, i.e. the Tigris-Diyala basin (e.g. Durand 1992: 123, Birot 1993: 224). Similarly a year-name of Samsuiluna of Babylon refers to the troops of Eshnunna as the “army of Akkade” (year 11, see Charpin 2004: 341). This usage demonstrates a correct understanding of the historical geography. As already noted, however, when the ancients used the adjective *akkadûm* with reference to language, they meant the Semitic language of wider southern Mesopotamia, i.e. Babylonian. The ancient nomenclature suggests that the people of ancient Iraq considered the area around Akkade, broadly speaking the north-eastern fringe of Babylonia, to be the historical heartland of the Babylonian language. As we shall see, this was not exactly the case, but the notion reflects the special place occupied by the era and legacy of the kings of Akkade in the intellectual culture of later Babylonia.

In traditional surveys of the history and periodization of Akkadian it has been conventional to speak of Old Akkadian until the end of the 3rd millennium, and then a division into Assyrian in the north and Babylonian in the south, each neatly subdivided into three stages, Old, Middle and New (Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian), all six roughly synchronized in pairs, with a prolongation of the southern dialect as Late Babylonian (Reiner 1966: 20-1, Ungnad 1992: 4-6, von Soden 1995: 2-5, Buccellati 1996: 1-2, Caplice 1988: 3, Huehnergard 1997: xxiii-xxv). This picture is over-simplistic (as many of these scholars intimate), especially in the light of increasing evidence, particularly from the 3rd millennium. A detailed survey yields a much more complex history.

### **Akkadian and East Semitic in the mid-3rd millennium**

The earliest traces of Akkadian are found predominantly in texts written in Old Sumerian, the principal written language of southern Iraq in the Early Dynastic period. Mid-3rd-millennium tablets from such Sumerian towns as Shuruppak (Fara) and Tell Abu Şalabikh attest the existence of individuals bearing names of East Semitic derivation, in a society where personal names were predominantly Sumerian. At Abu Şalabikh some of the scribes who wrote the famous Early Dynastic literary tablets bore East Semitic names, demonstrating that such names were part of the onomastic repertoire drawn on by the educated élites. These names do not, therefore, necessarily represent the infiltration into southern society of foreign elements from north Babylonia, but instead speak for a long history of linguistic symbiosis stretching back several centuries, perhaps well into prehistory. Many loanwords from East Semitic appear in Old Sumerian and reinforce the impression of what has been called a *Sprachbund*, a Sumerian-Akkadian linguistic area (Edzard 2003: 173-8). Interaction between Sumerian and Akkadian has also been documented in morphology and syntax; this is evidence of linguistic convergence, implying a growing similarity over time (Pedersén 1989).

Alongside the evidence for early Akkadian embedded in Sumerian texts are documents that seem to have been drawn up in an early form (or forms) of Akkadian.



Contemporaneous with the Old Sumerian tablets from Fara and Abu Šalabikh, they are predominantly written in Sumerian logograms but the presence of Semitic prepositions, pronouns, numbers and other particles betrays the language of composition. These documents include land deeds, votive inscriptions, a sale contract and administrative documents, and come predominantly from Kish and elsewhere in northern Babylonia, but also from as far north as Mari and Terqa on the middle Euphrates and as far south as Abu Šalabikh. On the basis of orthography, language, system of dating, names of months and persons, this Semitic cultural tradition of the mid-3rd millennium has been termed the “Kish civilization” (Gelb 1981, 1992).

The votive inscriptions of northern kings of the pre-Sargonic era document the use of the Semitic language of the Kish civilization in the wielding of political power at the very beginning of history. An instructive example is the short inscription from Girsu, in the deep south of Sumer, on a macehead dedicated to Ningirsu by Mesalim, “king of Kish”, who was overlord of much of Sumer about 2600 BC. The inscription is ostensibly written in Sumerian, but the order of the signs shows that they are logograms to be read in an East Semitic dialect, presumably an early form of Akkadian (Wilcke 1993: 35 fn. 32). In this era we must reckon with a situation in which the south of Babylonia (Sumer) was predominantly Sumerian-speaking, and the north predominantly Semitic-speaking. Central towns like Nippur and Abu Šalabikh were widely bilingual. Probably this pattern of distribution was already established in late prehistory. Among the East Semitic languages of 3rd-millennium and earlier Mesopotamia were ancestral dialects of Akkadian; indeed, much more is now known of the early history of East Semitic than was the case a few decades ago.

The use of Semitic language in administration, law and displays of royal power was complemented by literary creativity. Among the many Early Dynastic literary tablets from Abu Šalabikh was a text written not in the conventional Sumerian, as were the huge majority of extant early literary compositions, but in East Semitic. Knowledge of this text was much improved by the discoveries at Ebla (Tell Mardikh, south of Aleppo in Syria). At this site were found copies of late Early Dynastic-period literature that to some extent replicate the literary corpus attested in Babylonia, including two important compositions in Semitic, one of them a duplicate of the text from Abu Šalabikh (Lambert 1989, 1992, Krebernik 1992). Between them these early works of East Semitic literature offer a glimpse of the literary traditions of northern Babylonia in the pre-Sargonic era, that is, of the literature of the Kish civilization.

By the mid-3rd millennium these literary traditions had spread from north Babylonia upstream to Mari and thence further into Syria. It appears probable that a pattern familiar from later eras was already in place: “a written Babylonian-based Semitic ‘high language’ with local variations was used and understood throughout Syro-Mesopotamia, and local spoken Semitic dialects [were] arrayed along a linguistic continuum stretching from Babylonia across upper Mesopotamia to Ebla, varying from the written ‘high language’ to greater or lesser degrees” (Cooper 2000: 69). A Semitic language of south Mesopotamia, whether we know it as East Semitic,

Akkadian or Babylonian, remained the predominant language of writing in Syria for the best part of a millennium and a half.

The local dialect of Ebla, called Eblaite or Eblaic, is only partly visible to us because the writing system was predominantly logographic. Most scholars now consider it to have been an East Semitic language closely related to Akkadian (e.g. Huehnergard 1995: 2120, Huehnergard and Woods 2004). The language of Ebla has much in common with what may be called “Mariote”, the contemporaneous but little-known language of pre-Sargonic Mari (Gelb 1992). Some suppose that Eblaite was imported from Mesopotamia, specifically from Kish and northern Babylonia, where a “linguistic heterogeneity” is suspected (Michalowski 1987). Others view it as a local, Syrian variety of Akkadian that speaks for an early distribution of East Semitic outside Mesopotamia proper (Krebernik 1996).

### **The later 3rd millennium: Old Akkadian and Ur III Akkadian**

Old Akkadian was the term once used to signify all 3rd-millennium Akkadian, and some choose still to use the phrase thus, despite the increasing evidence for diversity in the Semitic of pre-Sargonic Mesopotamia. Others use the label to refer only to the best-known East Semitic of the 3rd-millennium, which can be defined in historical terms as the official language of the empire established by Sargon of Akkade. The latter position is taken here: for present purposes Old Akkadian is the Akkadian of the Sargonic state (otherwise known as Sargonic Akkadian).

Apart from Eblaite, Mariote and the literary East Semitic of the Kish civilization, little has survived of the linguistic diversity postulated in the preceding section. Nevertheless, against such a background it would be foolish to assume that as the 3rd millennium wore on East Semitic was represented in Mesopotamia proper only by the ancestor of Old Akkadian. The existence of other dialects, contemporary with Old Akkadian and near relatives of it, can also be postulated on the grounds that, in linguistic terms, neither the Babylonian nor the Assyrian form of the language is a direct, lineal descendant of Old Akkadian (Sommerfeld 2003). The two main varieties of Akkadian evidently had other ancestors.

**Old Akkadian.** The prominence of Old Akkadian in linguistic history is owed to a particular circumstance: its use as a written language in the chanceries of Sargon of Akkade and his successors. Old Akkadian was the official language of record of the Sargonic state, the vehicle of its monumental inscriptions, administrative texts, and official correspondence (Text sample 1). It also occurs in private letters and a little literature. Presumably it was chosen because it was the common tongue of Sargon and the men of Akkade who governed his dominions. Accordingly it can be defined in geographical terms as an East Semitic dialect of Uri (Warium) in the Tigris-Diyala basin, which was the land around Akkade. This marks it as a peripheral dialect (Sommerfeld 2003). Many other earlier and contemporaneous dialects of East

Semitic surely remain unknown for want of being written down. Among these are the ancestors of Assyrian and Babylonian.

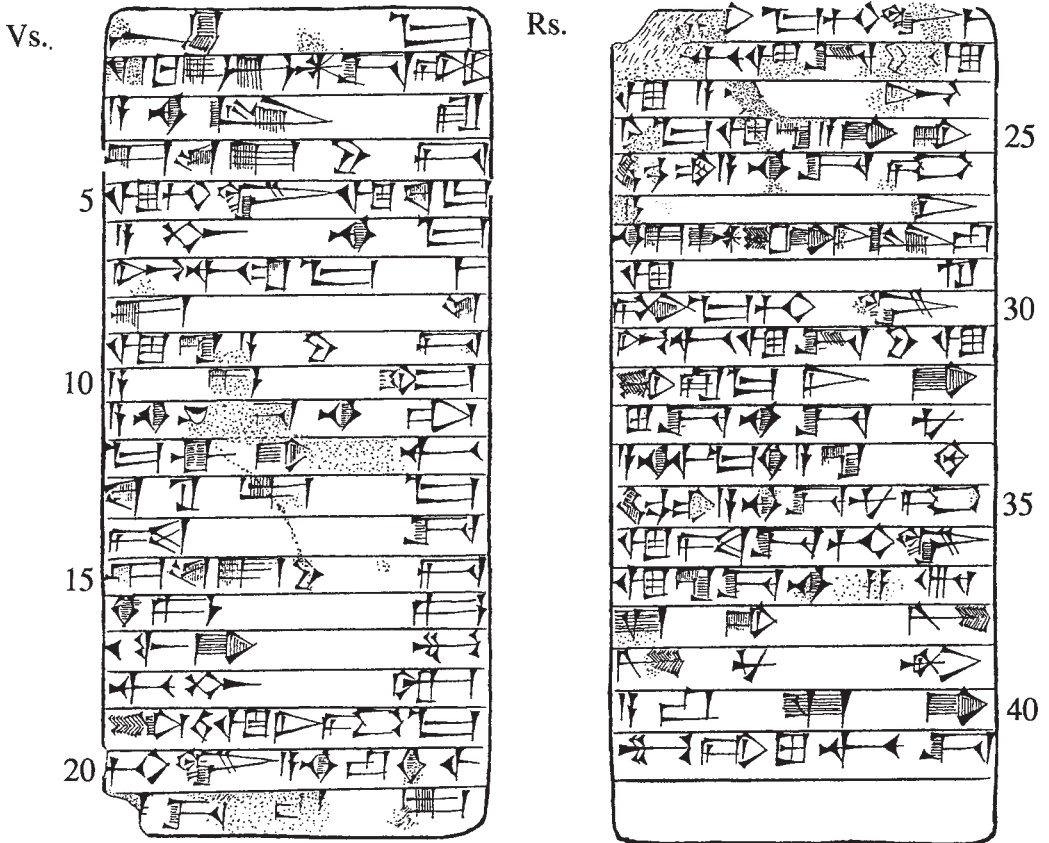


Fig. 3.2. Old Akkadian letter (BM 121205), copied by A. Westenholz  
 Lines 4-21 are transcribed as Text sample 1.

Our sight of Old Akkadian is confined by definition to the period of the Sargonic dynasty, when Sargon and his successors, most famously Naram-Sîn, carved out an empire in Mesopotamia and then lost it again (2334-2154 BC in the conventional chronology). Old Akkadian archival texts come from, in order north-west to south-east, the Habur triangle, Ashur on the Tigris, Gasur (Yorgan Tepe near Kirkuk), Suleimeh and the Diyala towns, Kish, Nippur, Adab, Ur and Lagash-Girsu in Babylonia, and Susa in Elam (modern Khuzistan). This is a geographical spread that

matches the extent of the Sargonic empire. It speaks only for the use there of Old Akkadian as a bureaucratic tool, not for the area in which it was a vernacular. In most of these places writing in Old Akkadian ceased abruptly with the end of the empire. Nevertheless, to the east, in places where Old Akkadian took cuneiform writing for the first time, there were lasting consequences. When Elam became independent of Akkade under Puzur-Inshushinak, Akkadian continued in use as an official language, and the cuneiform script it brought with it in due course replaced the old Proto-Elamite script (Galter 1995: 34-6). Rulers of eastern highland tribes also emulated Old Akkadian monumental inscriptions in vaunting their power, first in Gutium and then in Lullubum.

Text sample 1. Old Akkadian. Letter of Ishkun-Dagan to LUGAL.RA

*ḥaqlam ḥaruth u būlam 'uṣur 'appunnāma Quti'ummami ḥaqlam 'ulā aḥruth ay taqbi  
ana mithil bēr maqqātī sūsibma 'atta ḥaqlam ḥaruth kī 'eḫlūtīm yuwakkamū tibūtam  
lisse'ünikkumma būlam ana 'ālim suta'rib<sup>2</sup>*

Kienast and Volk 1995: Gir 19

Till the land and guard the livestock. And don't you dare say, "There were Gutians about, so I couldn't till the land!" Position *detachments of scouts* at half-league intervals and get on with tilling the land. If they spy men coming, they can attack on your behalf, while you get the livestock safely into town.

In Old Akkadian letters the verb is always in final position, with the exception of two instances in letters from the north (Gasur and probably Eshnunna) where a verb is followed by the same adverb of degree (*danniš*).<sup>3</sup> In Sargonic monumental inscriptions and the similar text of Erridupizir of Gutium (c. 2200) verbs in non-final position are commoner. This deviation from normal word order sets the language of royal display apart from the vernacular of the letters, and allows one to distinguish a literary register of Akkadian prose for the first time in its history. Much later the placing of the verb in penultimate position in its clause is a common mark of literary style. Very little survives of Old Akkadian poetry. The grammar of Old Akkadian and

<sup>2</sup> The transcription of Old Akkadian dialect is not an exact science. In this passage I have followed the new system proposed by Hasselbach 2005, but with the use of *th* for the interdental  $\theta$  ( $\check{s}_3$ ). Others would no doubt render some words differently.

<sup>3</sup> *HSS X 5: 19 li-šú-ru da-ni-iš* and *MAD I 298: 6-7 and 15-16 a-ši-ḥa-mì da-ni-iš da-ni-iš*; cf. *CT 50 69: 4-5 da-ni-iš-mì da-ni-iš a-ši-ḥa-am* (southern?).

its writing conventions were described by Gelb, who also compiled a dictionary dedicated to the dialect (Gelb 1957, 1961; now also Hasselbach 2005).

***Ur III Akkadian.*** Following the eclipse of the Sargonic kingdom, kings of the Gutian interregnum emulated Sargonic monumental inscriptions. Power was prized from the Gutians by a dynasty from Uruk in the Sumerian-speaking south. Choosing as their capital the nearby city of Ur, they presided over a Sumerian cultural swansong. In the administration of their state Sumerian took preference over Akkadian, which was little used in official communication, even if, as many suspect, it was rapidly ousting Sumerian as the vernacular in the deep south as well as further north. The Akkadian of this, the Ur III period, used to be considered a continuation of Old Akkadian. Recent study of what little survives, however, has revised that view, and the current consensus is that, beneath a mask of 3rd-millennium spelling conventions, Ur III Akkadian exhibits much greater continuity with what came afterwards than with what went before. Some describe it as “essentially an archaic version of Old Babylonian” (Westenholz 1999: 33), even as the “earliest, precisely identifiable developmental stage of the Babylonian dialect” (Hilgert 2003: 11). Many historians now judge the interval between the Sargonic and Ur III periods, the Gutian interregnum, to have endured for perhaps only a single generation, so that Sargonic and Ur III Akkadian can be considered nearly contemporaneous. The conclusion has been drawn that Old Akkadian, originating in northern Babylonia, and Ur III Akkadian, known mostly from the far south, are geographical variants of Akkadian, rather than diachronic or sequential forms of the language (Buccellati 2004: 108). The Akkadian of the Ur III period is now studied by Hilgert 2002.

***Archaic north-west Akkadian.*** From the middle Euphrates region we get a glimpse of Akkadian as it had developed outside Babylonia. At Mari (Tell Hariri) and Terqa (Tell al-‘Ashara), near Deir ez-Zor, tablets and clay models of livers are extant from what is known as the period of the military governors (Akk. *šakkanakku*), formerly dated after the fall of Ur. These military governors were a succession of local rulers initially subservient to Akkade but soon independent of first Akkade and then Ur (Durand 1995). The texts (administrative records and liver omens) exhibit a form (or forms) of early Akkadian sometimes identified as Old Akkadian (e.g. Edzard 1985). What is meant by this term is not, however, the specific dialect of Warium used by Sargon and Naram-Sîn. The language written at Mari was already distinctively East Semitic in the Early Dynastic period (see above), and evidently evolved as an Akkadian dialect. Study of the language of the *šakkanakku*-period at Mari shows that it still exhibits little evidence of West Semitic influence. This indicates that Akkadian was more entrenched on the middle Euphrates in the 3rd millennium than it was in the early 2nd millennium, when Amorite became the regional vernacular. The dialect of the *šakkanakku*-period is nevertheless distinct from the Akkadian of the south and represents a marginal, north-western form of the

language (Westenholz 1978). Archaic north-west Akkadian would be a better term for this and other early forms of the language from this area.

### **The early 2nd millennium: archaic Old Babylonian and Old Assyrian**

At the turn of the 3rd millennium the kingdom of Ur collapsed under the onslaught of Amorite nomads and Elamite invaders. In Babylonia itself, increasing numbers of written sources enable us to observe the local Akkadian in the period immediately following the fall of Ur. On the middle Tigris Assyrian emerged as a distinctive local form of Akkadian.

**Archaic Old Babylonian.** In the south, the bureaucrats of the successor states of Ur III continued to use Sumerian as the written language of administration and government, but in the north Akkadian texts became common again. The principal evidence comes from Eshnunna in the Diyala basin, where two groups of private letters document the transition from “archaic Old Babylonian” to classical Old Babylonian (Whiting 1987). The earlier letters show that here the southern dialect of Akkadian had ousted the local Old Akkadian by the turn of the millennium. They use a form of the language barely distinguishable from that written further south in the Ur III period; in some respects it seems slightly older (Heimpel 2004). The later letters indicate that this language quickly developed into the classic Old Babylonian dialect, for they display a form of it found in other corpora of early Old Babylonian texts (Whiting 1987, 16-19). Very early Old Babylonian royal inscriptions, such as those of Ashduniarim of Kish, exhibit an archaic subjunctive that may be a mark of an elevated, literary style.

**Old Assyrian.** A much larger and more productive body of material is the tablets from Cappadocia, which hold texts written in an early form of the Assyrian dialect of Akkadian that we call Old Assyrian. These tablets have been dug up in their thousands and, as excavations proceed, the number continues to grow at a steady rate. More than 21,500 are now extant (Michel 2001: 30). They constitute the private archives of members of Assyrian merchant colonies based mostly at Kanesh, modern Kültepe, near Kayseri (Text sample 2). Similar tablets have been found in smaller numbers elsewhere in Anatolia, at Hattusa (Boğazköy) and Alişar, and in and around Assyria, at Ashur itself and at Gasur, and illustrate the use of Old Assyrian by businesses across a wide area. Local rulers in Cappadocia could also use Old Assyrian as a medium of communication. However, documents of an Assyrian merchant based at Sippar in Babylonia, though dated in Assyrian style, are written in Old Babylonian (Walker 1980).

Text sample 2. Old Assyrian. Letter of Lamassi to her husband, Pushu-ken

*tašammēma tanēštum iltemin aḫum ana aḫim ana ḫalātīm izzaz kutabbitma u  
alkamma kuršika parrir . . . aḫatka amtam ana šimim taddinma anāku ana arbešarat  
šiḫil apturši Šalim-aḫum šina bētēn ištu atta tūš'u ētapaš nīnūma ana mati neppaš*

Garelli 1965: 159

You know, of course, how bad folk here have got. One fellow stands ready to eat the other alive! Treat yourself right: come home [to Ashur] and throw off your shackles! . . . Your sister went and sold one of the slavegirls, so I had to get her back at a cost of fourteen shekels. Since you went away that Shalim-ahum has set himself up with *two* houses. How about us? When shall we ever do that?

Letters and memoranda predominate in the archives of the colony at Kanesh, but rare copies of royal texts, spells and literary compositions offer a glimpse of other registers of Old Assyrian. A few Old Assyrian royal inscriptions also survive from Assyria itself. The Old Assyrian dialect is nearer to Old Akkadian than to Ur III Akkadian, unsurprisingly given Assyria's northerly location on the middle Tigris, but a closer kinship has been observed between Assyrian and the pre-Sargonic language of Ebla and Mari (Parpola 1988). Old Assyrian can be seen as a local development of one of the East Semitic dialects postulated as spoken in northern Mesopotamia and Syria in the mid-3rd millennium. Assyrian as a whole differs considerably from Babylonian in grammar and vocabulary, and maintains many of these distinctions throughout its history. Orthography, as well as dialect, was distinctive: Old Assyrian scribes used a restricted syllabary of only about one hundred and thirty signs and avoided all but a few common logograms. Old Assyrian language and writing have been well described by Hecker 1968.

### The Old Babylonian period

The period when Babylonia, and for a time all Mesopotamia, was dominated by Babylon under its 1st dynasty is known as the Old Babylonian period (1894-1595 BC in the conventional chronology), and the Akkadian of the time is called Old Babylonian.

**Old Babylonian.** Old Babylonian is considered the classic manifestation of Akkadian, and is the dialect usually taught to beginners. This is because in its southern form it shows great regularity, exhibits little contamination by other Semitic languages, and is the vehicle for a very extensive body of texts. Most famous of these is the laws of King Ḫammurapi (18th century), inscribed on a great stone stele found in 1901 at Susa, where it had been taken as booty in antiquity. Ḫammurapi's monument is widely celebrated as the world's first law code, though it is neither a

code nor the oldest collection of laws. It is certainly the Akkadian text most widely read in the original language, for beginners in Akkadian customarily grapple with it in universities worldwide. Old Babylonian is the normative form of Akkadian described in most standard reference grammars (Ungnad 1992, von Soden 1995, Buccellati 1996) and teaching manuals (Marcus 1978, Caplice 1988, Huehnergard 1997). It also presents a useful corpus for linguistic research (e.g. Kaplan 2002).

Alongside the many building inscriptions and several edicts of Ḫammurapi's dynasty are masses of archival documents (letters, memoranda, legal and administrative documents) from the same period (Text sample 3). These come especially from Sippar, Ur and Larsa (Senkereh). Twenty-five years ago they were thought already to number nearly fifteen thousand texts (Lieberman 1977: 10-11), but this was probably too conservative an estimate. Extant in far smaller numbers are monumental texts, both royal and private, e.g. funerary and votive inscriptions, and other genres of text that use plain Old Babylonian: compendia of omens for use in divination, astrology etc., with their associated ritual texts; vocabularies and other pedagogical lists; and other practical texts, such as mathematical problems, medical therapies, culinary recipes etc.

Text sample 3. Old Babylonian. Letter of Huzalum to his sister, Nishi-inishu

*šumma ina kinātim athūtam tarammī eqlam ašaršani lā tanaddinīma lā anazziq  
eqlam idnimma anāku lūpuš eli qātim aḫītīm ša ṭūb libbiki lūpuš u dummuqī amrī*  
*Altbabylonische Briefe XI 41*

If you truly have a sister's love for me, don't give the land away to somebody else, don't make me upset! Give the land to me and let me work it. I'll do what pleases you better than any stranger. You just see how well I'll do!

*Literary Old Babylonian.* Literary forms of Akkadian begin to be better attested in the Old Babylonian period, though the number of extant tablets and texts remains very small. The scarcity of Old Babylonian literature, and of narrative poetry in particular, is explained by the fact that in scribal schools Sumerian remained the language of instruction to the late 18th century. It was still the old literature in Sumerian that provided most of the copy-books and was most written down. The Old Babylonian literary corpus includes magic spells and incantations; omen compendia of all kinds; hymns, prayers and laments; proverbs, fables and other wisdom literature, love poetry, and mythological and narrative poetry. Enough survives of the last to show that the poems of Atram-hasis, Gilgamesh, Anzû and Etana were already present, alongside compositions about the ancient kings of Akkade. Literary texts in Old Babylonian display a vibrant poetic language unburdened by the scholasticism that came later, and give us an inkling of the style and content of what must have been a very extensive oral literature in Old Babylonian. The most recent studies of literary Old Babylonian style are Metzler 2002, Wasserman 2003, Izre'el and Cohen 2004.



Some Old Babylonian literary texts use an elevated register of the poetic language that is often known as “hymno-epic dialect” (Text sample 4). This is not a true dialect but literary Old Babylonian embellished with archaizing features, especially of morphology and vocabulary (von Soden 1931-3, Groneberg 1971, 1978-9). Some of these features are observed in older forms of Akkadian, not only Old Akkadian but also the archaic Old Babylonian of the earlier group of letters from Eshnunna (Whiting 1987: 18).

Text sample 4. Old Babylonian. From a hymn to Ishtar on behalf of King Ammiditana

*šaptīn duššupat balāṭum pīša  
simtišša iḥannimā šihātum  
sarḫat irimmū ramū rēšušša  
bani'ā simtāša bitrāmā ināša šit'ārā*

Thureau-Dangin 1925: 172

Syrup-sweet her lips, her mouth is life itself,  
upon her complexion bloom the smiles.  
So noble she, that charms of love do dwell upon her head,  
beauteous her colouring, iridescent her eyes and lustrous.

Old Babylonian literary texts in Akkadian come not only from Babylonia but also, in smaller quantities, from peripheral areas. The Sumero-Babylonian scribal tradition is well attested at Susa in Elam, so the presence there of a few Akkadian literary texts is unsurprising. More revealing is group of late Old Babylonian omen tablets, whose spellings attest to a peripheral orthographic tradition (Labat 1974). Some of these texts' curious spelling conventions also occur in the roughly contemporaneous omen tablets from Tigunum on the upper Tigris below Diyarbakir, which were certainly not composed in Babylonia. Fragments of late Old Babylonian omen texts recovered at Hazor in modern Israel show just how far abroad this typically Akkadian genre travelled. Another text composed in the periphery was a Babylonian heroic poem to the glory of king Zimri-Lim of Mari. The discovery of Old Babylonian cuneiform outside Babylonia sheds light on the diffusion of Babylonian intellectual culture to peripheral areas, on its reception and adaptation there, and on Babylonian Akkadian as a vehicle of original literary expression outside Babylonia. It also reveals the varieties of Akkadian used in peripheral areas at this time.

*Provincial and barbarized Old Babylonian.* Visible in the extant records for a timespan of three centuries, Old Babylonian is not monolithic: differences in phonology, grammar, syntax and spelling do arise from era to era, place to place and

register to register (*viz.* literary vs. vernacular), but they are comparatively small and the dialect can be said to be a coherent, though evolving, whole. For the most part local and diachronic variants of vernacular Old Babylonian remain to be studied in detail; a good example of one such local variant is the provincial Akkadian written in this period in Elam, where a significant Akkadian-speaking population may have been descendants of immigrants from southern Babylonia (Lambert 1991). The Akkadian of Old Babylonian Elam has been studied by De Meyer 1962 and Salonen 1962.

A special place, however, is occupied by the Old Babylonian dialects of the middle Euphrates and beyond. The extensive royal archives of Mari, excavated in the 1930s and since, number about twenty thousand pieces, and have been supplemented by smaller finds at Tell al-Rimah and other sites in upper Mesopotamia. These texts exhibit a form of provincial Old Babylonian also current in the Diyala region but more affected by the local West Semitic vernacular, Amorite, especially in vocabulary. Possibly it was never spoken, but used only as a written language in chancery. It has been described by Finet 1956 and Charpin 1989. A variety of Old Babylonian similar to that current in Mari was also written in the southern Levant, as demonstrated by tablets from Hazor, Shechem and Hebron in Palestine (Rainey 1999: 154\*-5\*). A purer form of Old Babylonian was used for royal building inscriptions by kings of Mari, notably Yaḥdun-Lim, and by other upper Mesopotamian kings of this period, especially Shamshi-Adad I.

More barbarized forms of Akkadian undoubtedly existed on the periphery. At Shusharrâ (Tell Shemshara), in the upland valley of the Lesser Zab in Iraqi Kurdistan, was found a modest archive of letters and administrative texts left by a local ruler who was a correspondent of Shamshi-Adad I. The letters from Shamshi-Adad exhibit a dialect close to that written at Mari. Those of more local origin display another provincial dialect of Old Babylonian (Kupper 2001). Personal names indicate the predominance here of Hurrian, a regional vernacular increasingly found across a large area of upper Mesopotamia, north Syria and Kurdistan. An early glimpse of Hurrianized Akkadian can be seen in the older group of texts excavated by Woolley at Alalah (Tell Aḩana) in the Turkish Hatay. The chancery of Yarim-Lim of Alalah (17th century) could write excellent formal Old Babylonian, but the imprint of Hurrian is increasingly observed in archival documents (Aro 1954-6, Giacumakis 1970).

In its variety the Babylonian written in the western and eastern peripheries early in the 2nd millennium conforms to the pattern already noted for the mid-3rd millennium. Provincial chanceries imported the technology of cuneiform writing from Babylonia, and with it texts of the scribal tradition written in good Babylonian. These provided a linguistic model for official inscriptions and international correspondence. Less permanent documents exhibited a greater influence of vernacular forms, whether West Semitic (Amorite) or Hurrian. The language of writing, whatever the register, was not a local vernacular. Later in the 2nd millennium the Akkadian of the western periphery is exposed in still greater variety.

## **The later 2nd millennium: Middle Babylonian, Middle Assyrian and international Akkadian**

The end of Ḥammurapi's dynasty came when Babylon fell to a raid by the Hittite adventurer Mursili I, a date conventionally fixed at 1595 BC. This was a cataclysmic event: the city was abandoned and probably remained so for many years. In the current scheme of linguistic history the fall of Babylon marks the end of the Old Babylonian dialect. The political vacuum was filled by a dynasty of kings of Kassite origin and by the little-known rulers of the Sealand, already established as a power in the far south. After an interval of uncertain length the Kassite dynasty imposed their dominion over all Babylonia and remained in power until the twelfth century. The throne then fell into the hands of a sequence of rulers known as the 2nd dynasty of Isin (1157-1026 BC). The language of Babylonia under these three dynasties, especially the Kassite era, is called Middle Babylonian.

***Middle Babylonian.*** The development of Old into Middle Babylonian was a slow evolution, at least in southern Mesopotamia. The application of a different term for Babylonian as it appeared in the latter part of the 2nd millennium arose not because Middle Babylonian is radically different from late Old Babylonian but because a long gap intrudes between the fall of Babylon and the reappearance in the south of documentation on a large scale. This interval is often characterized as a Dark Age. The darkness is gradually dispersing, however, for several large caches of tablets of the period immediately following the fall of Babylon have recently come to light and await publication. As the gap in documentation fills, so more will be known of the development of Akkadian in the mid-2nd millennium. It is already apparent that many of those traits thought characteristic of Middle Babylonian appear sporadically in later Old Babylonian (Lieberman 1977: 8-9 fn. 21). Legal texts from Tell Muhammad in the Diyala basin that post-date the fall and resettlement of Babylon are reported to continue Old Babylonian traditions. Clearly the transition was gradual.

The corpus of texts in Middle Babylonian has been estimated at fifteen thousand documents but the vast majority still awaits publication (Brinkman 1976: 3). Finds from 14th and 13th-century Nippur predominate, numbering about twelve thousand. These are mostly letters and legal and administrative documents, some of them connected with the personnel of the temple of Enlil at Nippur and with the management of its estates and income. Smaller groups of Middle Babylonian archival documents come from Ur, Dur-Kurigalzu and Babylon and date mostly to the 13th and 12th centuries. Other well-known Babylonian cities have yielded isolated finds; from provincial Tell Imlihiye on the Diyala comes the small 13th-century archive of a farming family (Kessler 1982). Letters of diplomacy sent by two 14th-century Kassite kings, Kadashman-Enlil I and Burnaburiash II, turned up in the Egyptian royal

archives found at El-Amarna in the 1880s and '90s. Letters of other Kassite kings survive in later copies. Royal building and votive inscriptions in Akkadian are comparatively rare, for an artificial form of Sumerian was favoured here, but a typical product of the royal chancery of this period are land grants written in Middle Babylonian and inscribed on beautiful stone monuments called *kudurrus*. Middle Babylonian has been described by Aro 1955.

The late 2nd millennium is known as a time of considerable literary creativity and also of scholarly editorial work that brought old compositions up to date and standardized them. Very little literature of the period has survived on Middle Babylonian tablets, however, and it is best known from 1st-millennium copies. Pedagogical texts and other tablets from scribal schooling preserve scraps of the standard Kassite-period copy-books, enough to show that the old Sumerian texts had largely been abandoned and their place taken by works in Akkadian, some of them new compositions, others already known in the Old Babylonian period. These, again, are mostly from Nippur, with a smattering from Ur and Babylon. Narrative poetry is represented by Gilgamesh and Atram-hasis, professional literature by an increasing number of omen compendia and medical tablets. The vehicle for some of this corpus is Middle Babylonian similar to the contemporaneous letters, but the poetic compositions, especially, were written (or rewritten) in a literary register of the language that English-speaking scholars call Standard Babylonian (*Jungbabylonisch* in German). The chief evidence for Standard Babylonian is 1st-millennium copies of literary texts and the royal inscriptions composed for the Sargonid kings of Assyria, and it will be discussed below, in the section on the early 1st millennium.

***Middle Assyrian.*** Akkadian continued to be spoken and written in Assyria, where it is known in the late 2nd millennium as Middle Assyrian. Here there is a much longer hiatus between the Old and Middle forms of the local dialect. Middle Assyrian documents come principally from Ashur, excavated before the 1st world war. The many archives of letters, legal and administrative documents found there stem from the 14th to 11th centuries, with a predominant number dating to the 13th. Other such texts come from Shibaniba (Tell Billa) near Nineveh, Tell al-Rimah and other sites in the Jezirah, where they document the presence of Assyrian officials posted locally.

From about the time of Adad-narari I (1307-1275) the royal inscriptions of Assyrian kings are mostly written in slightly Assyrianizing Middle Babylonian, demonstrating the continuing prestige of the Babylonian dialect in Assyria first observed when the region was ruled by Shamshi-Adad I. Middle Babylonian copies of southern literary compositions were imported to Assyria, especially as booty by Tukulti-Ninurta I when he sacked Babylon (about 1230 BC). From this time on Assyria, so often mightier than Babylonia in war and political influence, was under the cultural domination of its southern neighbour. More or less the entire Babylonian scribal tradition seems to have been known in 11th-century Assyria. Narrative poetry such as the poem of Etana, Ishtar's Descent and the Sumerian *Lugale* and

*Angimdimma* (by this time in bilingual Sumero-Babylonian format), other literary compositions and scholarly texts - hymns, omens, incantations, rituals, medical texts, hemerologies, Hammurapi's laws, lexical lists - were handed down in Assyrian copies that survive today. Over generations some of this Babylonian literature became more or less Assyrianized. New literature in praise of Assyrian might was composed locally, also in Babylonian; this includes the Tukulti-Ninurta epic.

The great Middle Assyrian law code, the unique palace edicts that regulate conduct at the Assyrian court, the Assyrian coronation ritual, however, all these had no literary pretensions and were written in pure Middle Assyrian, as was one of King Ashur-uballit's two letters to pharaoh, found at El-Amarna. Middle Assyrian has been studied by Mayer 1971.

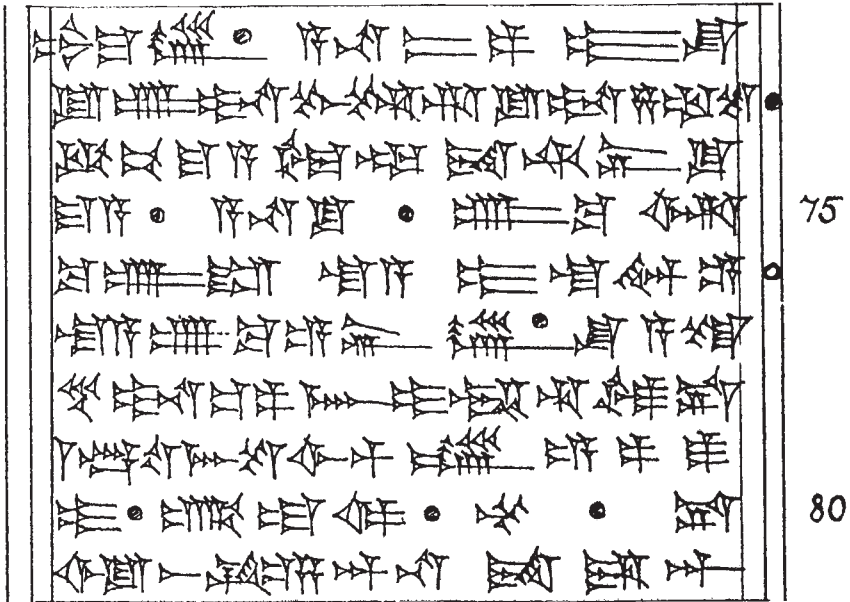


Fig. 3.3 The Middle Assyrian Laws, Tablet A §18, copied by O. Schroeder

## Text sample 5. Middle Assyrian. From the laws

*šumma a'īlu ana tappā'ešu lū ina puzre lū ina šalte iqbi mā aššatka ittinikkū mā anāku ubār ba"ura lā ila"e lā uba"er a'īla šu'ātu arbā ina ḥaṭṭāte imahḥuṣuṣ iltēn uraḥ ūmāte šipar šarre eppaš igaddimūš u iltēt bilat annaka iddan*

MA Law §18

If a man says to his friend, whether in private or in a fight, "Your wife sleeps around," and adds, "I shall prove it," but he cannot prove it and does not prove it, that man shall be flogged forty strokes of the rod, shall do the king's labour for a full month, have his head shaved and pay a fine of one talent of tin (*or lead*).

**Peripheral Akkadian.** Akkadian continued to be employed beyond the bounds of Babylonia and Assyria proper. In the latter part of the 2nd millennium there is extensive evidence for peripheral dialects of Akkadian and for the continuing spread of literary Babylonian outside Mesopotamia. Legal documents from Terqa on the middle Euphrates and private archives from Ekalte (Tell Munbaqa) further upstream exhibit a continuation of Old Babylonian traditions of writing. However, by the early Kassite period (16th century) the Babylonian written at Terqa contained provincial traits, including loans from West Semitic and the occasional Assyrianism (Podany 1991-3). Middle Assyrian eventually prevailed here as the language of writing.

Archives excavated at Gasur, at this time known as Nuzi, in the 1920s and '30s yielded about seven thousand tablets distributed among perhaps as many as forty archives, institutional and private. Similar tablets also came from nearby Arrapha (Kirkuk) and Tell al-Fakhar. They hold legal and juridical documents, letters and administrative texts written in a form of Akkadian much influenced by the local Hurrian vernacular and dating to the 15th and 14th centuries. This is the period just before the rise of the Middle Assyrian state under Ashur-uballit I, who was probably responsible for Nuzi's destruction. The local suzerain was the king of Arrapha, a vassal in turn of Mittanni, at that time a greater power than Assyria. The use of Akkadian by kings of Mittanni is well documented (Adler 1976) and speaks for the continuing dominance of Babylonian as a written means of communication in upper Mesopotamia, outside Assyria proper. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the Hurrianized Akkadian of Nuzi is more akin to early Middle Babylonian than to Assyrian, though it shows occasional Assyrianisms. The language of the Nuzi texts has been studied by Berkooz 1937 and Wilhelm 1970.

Our knowledge of the Akkadian written in Levantine Syria in the same period formerly rested on 15th-century tablets from Alalah, treaties involving the local rulers, Idrimi and his son Niqmepa, and Idrimi's autobiographical statue inscription. The Hurrianized Akkadian of these texts is described by Rowe 1998. Also extant, but less informative linguistically, was an archive of inventories unearthed by a pre-war

French expedition at Qatna (Tell Mishrife), further up the Orontes valley in Syria. The evidence has been much augmented by the discovery of an important 14th-century royal archive during the new excavations at Qatna. This archive of letters and administrative documents will shed fascinating new light on the political relations of this small Syrian city-state with the major powers, at a time when Mittanni was retreating before the expansion of the Hittite empire. As regards the study of language, the epigraphists deciphering the archive report the use of a new variety of Hurrianized Akkadian (Richter 2002). Extensive glossing in Hurrian shows very clearly that Hurrian was the local vernacular.

Further south, at Taanach (Tell Ti'innik) near Megiddo in Palestine, 15th-century letters and administrative documents are early evidence for a form of local Babylonian under West Semitic influence (Rainey 1999). In Elam, east of Babylonia, scribes were briefly writing Akkadian again, as shown by 14th-century archives from Kabnak (Haft Tepe), near Susa (Glassner 1991). The texts are mostly administrative but an omen list is evidence for the Babylonian scribal tradition and curious orthographies again speak for a local tradition of cuneiform scholarship (Herrero and Glassner 1996). The local vernacular of Elam at this time was Middle Elamite, but the prestige of Babylonian is also seen in its use in several monumental inscriptions of King Untash-napirisha (13th century). This ruler was evidently what might be called a Babylonophile, for he gave his new ceremonial cult-centre an Akkadian name, Al-Untash "Untash-town" (now Choga Zambil). A century later, however, Shutruk-Nahhunte and his sons Kutir-Nahhunte and Shilhak-Inshushinak, the vanquishers of Babylon (sacked in 1157 BC), had their inscriptions written in Elamite alone.

By the floruit of the Nuzi and Qatna archives scribes were writing Akkadian in Anatolia again. As elsewhere in the West the Babylonian scribal tradition had been imported wholesale to the Hittite capital at Hattusa along with the technology of cuneiform writing. This was most probably not a single event but a continuing process. One reason for suspecting this is that texts of the scribal tradition can be seen there at several stages in their development. For example, the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh occurs first in an early 14th-century copy very close to an Old Babylonian version known from Babylonia, then as a partly garbled Akkadian paraphrase (13th-century copy), probably composed locally or in north Syria, and also as a story retold in Hittite and in Hurrian.

***International Akkadian.*** Already employed at Hattusa during the Hittite Old Kingdom, when royal texts of Hattusili I were furnished with Akkadian translations (Galter 1995: 36-7), Akkadian is most visible there as an international language for diplomatic correspondence and treaty-writing in the service of the Hittite state (described by Labat 1932, Durham 1976, Marazzi 1986). In this the Hittites were falling into line with the rest of the East Mediterranean. What might be called "international" Akkadian is best known from the Egyptian royal archives of El-Amarna (ancient Akhetaten), the short-lived capital of the 14th-century pharaoh

Akhenaten (Amenophis IV), from smaller archives of the same period, such as that at Kumidi (Kamid el-Loz) in Lebanon, and from isolated finds such as those of Sidon, on the Lebanese coast, and of Hazor, Tell Aphek, Gezer and Beth Shean in modern Israel. These demonstrate that during the Late Bronze Age a very extensive network of diplomatic links was in place between the major and minor powers of the Near East and their vassals, and Akkadian was the medium of international communication. The Hittite monarch and the kings of Babylonia and Assyria, the ruler of Alashiya (Cyprus), Egyptian vassals like Abdi-Ashirta of Amurru, Rib-Hadda of Byblos and Abi-Milku of Tyre: all wrote to pharaoh in forms of Akkadian and received his reply in Akkadian.

Royal letters from kings of the Kassite dynasty of Babylon have already been mentioned in discussing Middle Babylonian, and the Middle Assyrian letter of an Assyrian ruler has also been noted. The language of most of the Amarna correspondence, however, was far from these pure Mesopotamian dialects, exhibiting many provincial archaisms and very considerable influence of local tongues. It was not homogeneous. Letters from Hittite, north Syrian and Egyptian chanceries indicate greater or lesser influence of Hurrian, and are held to represent a northern, Hurro-Akkadian tradition of writing and language. In the southern Levant various forms of pidgin-Akkadian were used, more or less combining Babylonian vocabulary with local West Semitic (Canaanite) grammar (Moran 1992: xviii-xxii, Rainey 1996, Izre'el 1998). Akkadian dialects of the Amarna period have lately been given renewed attention (Sivan 1984, Gianto 1990, Izre'el 1991, Moran 2003, Cochavi-Rainey 2003).

Like the cuneiform scribes of Hattusa, the writers of the letters of the Amarna archives learnt to master cuneiform in the traditional way, so that texts of the Babylonian scribal tradition have been recovered from El-Amarna. These are mostly lexical texts but include also poems on mythological and heroic subjects, such as Adapa, Nergal and Ereshkigal, and Sargon King of Battle. The Egyptians were taught cuneiform writing by Hittites of the Old Kingdom (16th-15th centuries), and some Akkadian literature found at Amarna bears a Hurro-Hittite cultural imprint. This means that though in Egypt cuneiform writing has so far only turned up at 14th-century Amarna, older finds are to be expected. Other compositions, handed down at Amarna in good Middle Babylonian recensions, imply continuing influence, either directly from Mesopotamia or through Syro-Mesopotamian intermediaries. There was certainly a tradition of cuneiform learning in the southern Levant well before the tablets from Amarna. The presence of Old Babylonian at Hazor has already been mentioned, as has the early Middle Babylonian archive from Taanach. Megiddo can also be cited, where a Middle Babylonian paraphrase of Gilgamesh was already known in perhaps the 15th century. So in writing Akkadian, Akhenaten's chancery at Amarna was following the trend, not leading it. While we talk of the Amarna period as exemplifying the widespread use of international Akkadian in the eastern Mediterranean region of the 14th century, it should be remembered that this was not an innovation of this period, even in Egypt.



Later evidence reveals the full extent of cuneiform learning and Akkadian writing in the West. Towards the end of the 2nd millennium much of the Near East, particularly around the eastern Mediterranean, suffered in the catastrophes that brought the Late Bronze Age to an end. Among cities that fell at that time were Alalah, Ugarit (Ras Shamra) on the Mediterranean seaboard, and Emar (Meskene) on the Euphrates downstream of Carchemish. Destruction levels at Ugarit and Emar, especially, have yielded many archives of cuneiform tablets, large and small, ranging across the 14th to 12th centuries. Their texts demonstrate again the use in the periphery of local forms of written Akkadian for practical communication and documentation - the familiar combination of letters, legal, juridical and administrative texts - built on an education in the scribal tradition imported from Babylonia. The latter is represented by lexical texts, scholarly compendia, fables and wisdom literature, Middle Babylonian Gilgamesh and an account of the flood, no doubt a fragment of the poem of Atram-hasis. The Akkadian of Ugarit has been much researched (Swaim 1962, Huehnergard 1989, van Soldt 1991), and linguistic studies of Emar Akkadian are fast catching up (Ikeda 1995, 1998, Seminara 1998, Penttici 2001).

The end of the Late Bronze Age in the eastern Mediterranean brought with it a breakdown in international communications that spelled the termination of local traditions of Akkadian writing in Mediterranean Syria, Egypt and Anatolia, and, after perhaps 1500 years, the end in the west of the cultural domination of Babylonian language and scribal traditions.

### **The early 1st millennium: Neo-Assyrian, Standard and Neo-Babylonian**

The transition to the Iron Age coincides with a loss of documentation that intervenes in the history of Akkadian. The turn of the millennium marks the beginning of a period of confusion in Mesopotamia, as a flowing tide of Arameans overran the north, for all the earlier efforts of Tiglath-pileser I (1114-1076) to stem it, leading to the eventual collapse of Assyrian power. Recovery lay two centuries away. Babylonia, already weakened by Assyrian invasion, succumbed first to famine and then to more Arameans.

Until recently this interval of silence was a convenient point to divide Middle Babylonian and Middle Assyrian from the later dialects, but new discoveries sharpen the picture. A ninth-century diplomatic letter, sent to the king of Hama in Syria from Anat (now Ana) on the middle Euphrates, gives a rare glimpse of the southern language late in the evolution of Middle to Neo-Babylonian (Parpola 1990). The transition from Middle to Neo-Assyrian was explored by Postgate 1997. Evidence from provincial centres adds to the picture, demonstrating that the evolution of Middle to Neo-Assyrian had already begun in the early 11th century. Inscriptions of Ashur-ketti-leshir, a king of Mari and vassal of Tiglath-pileser I, are couched in

heavily Assyrianized Babylonian, and some of their Assyrianisms anticipate Neo-Assyrian grammar and spelling (Maul 1992: 18-19). A small archive of legal documents excavated in south-eastern Turkey at Giricano, on the upper Tigris (ancient Dunnu-sha-Uzibi), dates to the same era, and exhibits what is clearly a transitional dialect, already partly Neo-Assyrian (Radner 2004: 53-4).

The darkness lifts gradually: as the nation states of Mesopotamia reasserted their authority, economic stability increased and written sources grow in number. Assyria was the first to recover its political and military might, especially under kings Ashurnasirpal II (883-859) and Shalmaneser III (858-824), who campaigned vigorously and successfully pushed back the frontiers of the Assyrian state on all sides. In this era of renewed Assyrian strength it is significant that the long inscriptions that report these kings' campaigns are written in a form of Babylonian under heavy Assyrian influence (Deller 1957a, b). Further west and north, the local ascendancy of Assyrian over Babylonian is clearer still. A statue of Hadad-yis'i, an Aramean who became Assyrian provincial governor of Bit-Bahiyani in the mid-9th century, was found at Tell Fekheriye in the Habur triangle, inscribed with text in both Akkadian and Aramaic. The Akkadian is partly Assyrian and partly an Assyrianized literary Babylonian (Fales 1983). In Urartu, a short-lived but troublesome kingdom based near Lake Van, royal inscriptions of the late 9th century were couched in Assyrian, though this experiment soon gave way to Assyrian-Urartian bilingualism and monolingual Urartian texts (Wilhelm 1986, Galter 1995: 37-9).

**Neo-Assyrian.** In Assyria itself archival documents appear again in the 9th century (at Shibaniba) and become more common in the late 8th century, turning into a flood by the reigns of Sargon II (721-705), Esarhaddon (680-669) and Ashurbanipal (668-627). Private and public documents occur, but texts from the great institutions of state predominate, especially archives from the successive royal capitals of Kalah (Nimrud) and Nineveh (Kuyunjik). Among the twenty thousand tablets and fragments excavated at Nineveh in the 1850s and subsequently, it is estimated that archival documents - letters, legal and administrative documents, royal grants and decrees, officials' reports, especially from diviners, astrologers and other scholars, and oracular questions on matters of state - add up to more than 5,500 (Parpola 1986: 228). These derive overwhelmingly from the period 721 to 645 and document the history and politics of imperial Assyria in extraordinary detail (Text sample 6).

Smaller quantities of tablets come from other Assyrian cities, especially Ashur, and from provincial centres across the Jazira (Guzana-Tell Halaf, Til-Barsip, Dur-Katlimmu etc.). Isolated discoveries from more distant provinces of the empire are the Neo-Assyrian tablets found at Tarsus in Cilicia (Goetze 1939), at Samaria, the capital of Israel taken by Shalmaneser V in 722 BC (Pedersén 1998: 225), and further south at Gezer (Macalister 1911: 22-30). These document the activities of expatriate bureaucrats and are legacies of imperial administration and practice. They do not speak for any re-establishment in the west of cuneiform and Akkadian as media of local communication and intellectual activity.

The language of all these documents is Neo-Assyrian. In Neo-Assyrian the influence of Aramaic on Akkadian is seen for the first time. In the written form of the language Aramaisms are very limited but Aramaic notes written on many tablets indicate the growing currency of Aramaic as the vernacular language. In a multi-ethnic empire where natives of Assyria were hugely outnumbered by Aramaic-speakers from upper Mesopotamia and Levantine Syria, many of them forcibly resettled in the heartland of Assyria itself, the native dialect was fast losing ground as a spoken language. It continued to be written, however, where tradition dictated that it was the proper medium of communication. This was so even after the collapse of the empire, for legal texts from Dur-Katlimmu (Tell Sheikh Hamad) on the river Habur, dated to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon, document the survival of written Assyrian a little after the fall of Nineveh and the demise of the imperial Assyrian government (Radner 2002). The Neo-Assyrian scribal tradition lived on at Harran, one of the old imperial cities, to influence the monumental inscriptions of Nabonidus (555-539) (Schaudig 2001: 72-3). Neo-Assyrian letters were early the subject of special grammatical study (Ylvisaker 1912) and the dialect has met with renewed attention more recently (Hämeen-Anttila 2000, Luukko 2004).



Fig. 3.4. Neo-Assyrian letter (SAA XVI 105= K 11; © Trustees of the British Museum)

Text sample 6. Neo-Assyrian. Letter of Ubru-Nabû to the king of Assyria, probably Esarhaddon

*ina pānēya izakkar abū'a ina māt nakire mēt mā ḥanšā šābē ša qātēšu šinšerat sīsē  
ina qātēšunu iššabtūni ittalkūni ina battibatti ša Ninūa kammusū mā anāku  
aqṭibāššunu mā abū'a lū mēt maššartu ša šarre atā turamme'ā tallikāni ūmā annurig  
ina pān šarre bēlēya ussēbilaššu šarru bēli liš'alšu kī ša abutūni ana šarre bēlēya  
liqbi*

*State Archives of Assyria XVI 105*

(Shumma-ilu) declared in my presence, "My father died in enemy territory. The fifty men who were under his command took twelve horses and came back. They are staying near Nineveh. I told them, 'My father may be dead, but why did you forsake the king's duty and come back?'" I am sending him right now to the king my lord. Let the king my lord question him, so he tells the king my lord how the matter stands.

Alongside the masses of archival documents in the Neo-Assyrian dialect, the early 1st millennium also bears witness to a brief flowering of Assyrian court literature and religious poetry. The long tradition of native scholarship in Sumero-Babylonian textual analysis began also to spawn academic works in the Neo-Assyrian dialect. Though short-lived, these are further signs of the growing prestige of Assyrian in intellectual culture during the hegemony of the Assyrian empire.

**Standard Babylonian.** Notwithstanding the Assyrians' literary creativity in their own dialect, Babylonian maintained its position as the foremost language of literary expression. The Sargonid kings, especially, opted to produce royal building inscriptions and annals in the literary register of Babylonian, introduced above as Standard Babylonian. This is the dialect of Akkadian in which was phrased much of the literature handed down in the scribal tradition of the 1st millennium, ranging from mythological and other narrative poetry, through hymns and poetic prayers, fables and wisdom literature, pseudo-autobiography and didactic poetry, and the occasional folktale, to scholarly compendia (e.g. omens), professional literature (e.g. exorcistic and therapeutic texts), calendar lore and technical treatises. Some of this literature was very old, being traceable back to Old Babylonian recensions. Examples are narrative poems in comparatively plain style: Anzū, Atram-hasis, Etana, Ishtar's Descent to the Netherworld and Gilgamesh (Text sample 7). Other compositions derived from later in the 2nd millennium, often displaying the more recherché vocabulary and learned touches of Middle Babylonian scholar poets. The Creation epic (*Enūma eliš*) comes under this category, as does the poem of the Righteous Sufferer (*Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*).

## Text sample 7. Standard Babylonian. From the Epic of Gilgamesh

*Gilgāmeš ana Enkidu ibrišu  
 šarpiš ibakkīma irappud šēra  
 anāku amātma ul kī Enkidu-mā  
 nissatu iterub ina karšīya  
 mūta aplahma arappud šēra  
 ana lēt Ūta-napišti mār Ubār-Tutu  
 urḫa šabtākūma ḫanṭiš allak*

SB Gilgamesh IX 1-7

For his friend Enkidu Gilgamesh  
 was weeping bitterly as he roamed the wild:  
 “I shall die, and shall I not then be like Enkidu?  
 Sorrow has entered my heart.  
 I became afraid of death, so go roaming the wild,  
 to Uta-napishti, son of Ubar-Tutu,  
 I am on the road and travelling swiftly.”

Almost all of Standard Babylonian literature is currently known only from 1st-millennium copies. These derive from Assyrian royal, temple and private libraries of the 8th to 7th centuries and from Babylonian private and temple libraries of later centuries. Isolated finds at Hama in Syria (Laessøe 1956) and Tarsus in Cilicia (Goetze 1939: No. 8) demonstrate that agents of the Assyrian empire had such tablets in the west, but these were surely exports and not evidence of any local engagement with Babylonian culture. The practice of copying texts from the Sumero-Babylonian scribal tradition was in this period restricted to Mesopotamia proper, and from the 6th century confined to Babylonia alone. By this era, and probably for some time before, the Standard Babylonian corpus was no longer living literature, but the preserve chiefly of the scholars and students engaged in teaching and learning cuneiform and in writing ceremonial texts in traditional literary language. At the Assyrian and Babylonian courts and in the market place the more vital language of literary expression and oral literary tradition was undoubtedly Aramaic.

Nevertheless, Standard Babylonian remained a productive dialect throughout the 1st millennium, alongside new developments in style that were less successful (Lambert 1968). Most inscriptions of Nabopolassar and his successors display Standard Babylonian language and word order, even if they are often falsely characterized as Neo- or Late Babylonian. The prose of Nabonidus (555-539) exults in a particularly high literary Standard Babylonian that occasionally reads almost as poetry. Among later rulers, Cyrus of Persia (538-530) and the Seleucid Antiochus I Soter (281-261) both put out commemorative inscriptions in the traditional style.

Standard Babylonian is not a homogeneous dialect. The modes of expression range from self-consciously ornate and highly archaizing, reminiscent of the “hymno-epic” style of some Old Babylonian poetry, to much plainer modes of expression that are nevertheless old. For example, a stylistic device favoured especially by the composers of the Sargonid annals was the placing of the verb in penultimate position in its clause, a feature of prose style met above in Old Akkadian monumental texts. The grammar of all forms of Standard Babylonian, allowing for variations in spelling and the occasional intrusion of vernacular, exhibits a recognizable affinity with Old Babylonian. Perhaps its greatest unifying feature is that this was always elevated, old-fashioned language, distinct from any kind of vernacular Akkadian in lexicon, phrasing and word order. The standard treatment is Reiner 1966. Studies of different kinds of Standard Babylonian have concentrated on the epic poetry (Hecker 1974), “hymnic” literature (Groneberg 1987) and royal inscriptions (Stein 2000, Schaudig 2001).

**Neo-Babylonian.** The vernacular form of the southern dialect, Neo-Babylonian, was also used at the imperial Assyrian court, for after the final annexation of Babylonia under Sennacherib in 689 BC, many Babylonian officials, scholars and administrators employed it in their dealings with the government and received letters back in the same dialect (Text sample 8). The language of the Neo-Babylonian letters from Nineveh has been explored in Woodington 1982 and de Vaan 1995.

Text sample 8. Neo-Babylonian. Letter of King Sargon II of Assyria to Sîn-iddina

[ša tašpura umma . . . ] *kī pān šarri mahru ina libbi sipri armāyi luspirma ana šarri lušēbila mīnamma ina šipirti akkadattu lā tašaṭṭarma lā tušēbbila kitta šipirtu ša ina libbi tašaṭṭaru kī pī agannītimma idat lū šaknat*

*State Archives of Assyria XVII 2*

Regarding the message you wrote . . . , “If it is acceptable to the king I will write a letter to the king in Aramaic style,” why can you not write a letter to me in Akkadian style? Be sure that the document you write is like this one [i.e. in cuneiform]. It is the custom. Let it remain so!

In the south, a glimpse of early Neo-Babylonian is given by the governor’s archive from 8th-century Nippur, which contains a mix of letters with texts from the Sumero-Babylonian scribal tradition. Neo-Babylonian archival documents begin to become common in the late 7th century. As Babylon gained economic power as the seat of a new empire, and other southern cities such as Sippar, Cutha, Borsippa, Dilbat, Nippur, Ur and Uruk prospered with it, the extant documentation increases. Twenty years ago it was estimated that more than thirteen thousand archival documents - letters, economic, business, juridical and legal documents - dating to the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods had already been published (Dandamayev 1986:

274). This is only a small fraction of the extant whole, however: the administrative archive of the temple of Shamash at Sippar excavated by Rassam between 1878 and 1882 numbers at least twice that quantity of pieces on its own. At perhaps ten thousand tablets even the archive of Eanna at Uruk (7th to 5th centuries) looks small by comparison. Alongside huge institutional archives of this kind are extensive dossiers that document over several generations the activities of families of businessmen, such as the Murashû family at Nippur and the Egibi family at Babylon. Here attempts to understand the form and function of the archives have taken precedence over grammatical research. The language of the business documents was studied by Tallqvist 1890. More recently scholars have concentrated on individual aspects of the dialect (e.g. Dietrich 1969, Streck 1995).

The empire of Nabopolassar (625-605) and his successors took many Babylonians abroad, in the service of the imperial administration and on private ventures. Tablets from expatriates' archives have surfaced in several Levantine cities but, as in the Neo-Assyrian period, they speak only of the use there of Akkadian cuneiform by people of Mesopotamian origin, not of any local revival of cuneiform writing (Dalley 1993: 141-3). One Babylonian family left an archive of Neo-Babylonian legal documents at Nereb (Neirab), near Aleppo, where they lived in the mid-6th century. Some of their tablets were glossed with Aramaic notations. This practice became more common in Babylonia itself in the 5th century, when it speaks for a growing reliance on Aramaic among the record-keeping classes. As in Assyria, Aramaic was strongly entrenched in the Babylonian south early in the imperial period, boosted by a large population of Aramean and Chaldean descent. The prevalence of Aramaic surely had a greater effect on spoken Babylonian than on the written language, which remained remarkably impervious to Aramaic loanwords. The loss of inflected endings on nouns was probably a development speeded up by analogy with Aramaic. The writing of cuneiform was also affected by the advent of bilingual literacy. Changes in spelling conventions can be attributed to the influence of Aramaic writing practices.

It was not all one-way traffic: Babylonian had some influence on Aramaic too (Kaufman 1974), but the suspicion is that it was steadily losing ground as a vernacular, spoken language when Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562) made Babylon great again. The strength of the cuneiform tradition kept it alive as a written language for centuries more.

### The end of Akkadian: Late Babylonian and cuneiform scholarship

Babylon fell to Cyrus the Great of Persia in 539 BC. This date marks the end in ancient history of independent nation states in Mesopotamia, but Babylonian civilization was far from spent. Religious life and intellectual culture continued much as before, perpetuating by many centuries the ancient languages that were their vehicles (Oelsner 2002b). Under the Achaemenid Persians, Akkadian found use as one of several languages of state display, most famously in the trilingual rock inscription of Darius I (521-486) at Bisutun (Behistun) in Iran. Only a single Neo-Babylonian tablet was found among the large archive excavated in the fortification wall at Darius' capital, Persepolis, for this king's use of Akkadian was ceremonial not practical. Imperial Aramaic was the official *lingua franca* of the Persian empire. From the time of Xerxes I (485-465) there is across Babylonia generally a marked decrease in the number of Neo-Babylonian archival documents now extant. It seems that increasingly more communication and record-keeping were being done in Aramaic alone. The great temple of Shamash at Sippar abandoned cuneiform writing early in Xerxes' reign, presumably in favour of the alternative technology. Private letters become very rare after about 450 BC, a development that signals for most scholars the final extinction of a vernacular Babylonian tongue, after a long decline.

The death of the Akkadian language was much prolonged, however, for it was bound up with the death of cuneiform writing. The persistence of the ancient script kept Akkadian alive among the scribal classes long after it ceased to be anybody's first language. From the extant documentation the general trend of the later 1st millennium is clear: as in private life Aramaic writing was adopted more widely, and as in public life successive non-native governments demanded expertise first in Aramaic and then in Greek, so cuneiform was used for an ever more restricted set of purposes. This in turn steadily diminished the number of those who had occasion to learn and use the Akkadian language.

**Late Babylonian.** The convention is to divide the vernacular Babylonian of the 1st millennium into Neo-Babylonian and Late Babylonian. There is no consensus as to where in time the division should occur. Some place it at the accession of Nabopolassar, others at the capture of Babylon by Cyrus eighty-six years later. Both are manifestly dates of political rather than linguistic significance and neither marks a clear discontinuity in the history of the southern dialect. However, the Babylonian written under Alexander the Great, his successors the Seleucid kings, and then the Parthian dynasty of Iran, shows a definite evolution from 7th-century language, and rightly deserves the label Late Babylonian.

At Babylon and Uruk legal documents composed in Babylonian on clay continue through the reigns of Alexander the Great (330-323 BC), his short-lived



dynasty and the Seleucid kings that succeeded it, but are little in evidence after the Parthian conquest (140 BC). The same can be said for texts that capture in writing the daily rituals of the great temples, a genre of Late Babylonian writing whose rise is symptomatic of anxiety about the future of these venerable institutions. At Borsippa an archive of letter-orders (memoranda from temple administrators) records the activities of the temple brewers' office at the beginning of the Hellenistic era. The last surviving archives from the great temples of Uruk date from the early to mid-2nd century, but an isolated tablet records the temples' existence as late as 108 BC. Administrative records are more plentiful at Babylon, where they continue beyond the Seleucid domination into the early 1st century BC. In reporting the continuing existence of several temples at the old capital, they document the careers of individual astronomers maintained out of temple funds (Text sample 9). Astronomical diaries written at Babylon straddle the Persian and Seleucid periods but fail in the mid-1st century BC.

Text sample 9. Late-Babylonian. Protocol of the temple assembly of Babylon (127 BC)

*ultu ūmi annâ ša šattussu šina mana kaspu kurummat Itti-Marduk-balātu ā abišunu ana Bēl-aḥḥe-ušur u Nabû-mušētiq-uddi ultu ḥišiḥṭīni ninamdin libbû mimma ša Itti-Marduk-balātu abūšunu iššû ša našāri inaššarû u tērsēti ša šattussu inamdinū itti Bēlšunu Lâbāši Mūrānu Iddin-Bēl Bēl-nāširšu ṭupšar Ud-An-Enlilla u ṭupšar Ud-An-Enlilla šanūti*

Pinches 1889-90: 132

The pronunciation of this passage, based on the evidence of roughly contemporaneous Greek transcriptions of Akkadian, might be something like this:

*ultu ūw annâ sa sattus šina mana kaspu kuruwat Ittiwardukbalât ā abišun ana Bēlahḥuḥsur u Nabûwusētiqud ultu ḥišiḥṭīn ninamdin libbû miwa sa Ittiwardukbalât abūšun iššû sa našār inaššarû u tērsēt sa sattus inamdinū itti Bēlšun Lâbās Wūrān Iddinbēl Bēlnāširs ṭupšar Ud-An-Enlilla u ṭupšar Ud-An-Enlilla sanūt*

From this day forth, every year, we shall pay from our resources two shekels of silver, the expenses of the aforementioned Itti-Marduk-balaṭu, their father, to Bel-aḥḥe-ušur and Nabû-mushetiḳ-uddi, in accordance with what their father Itti-Marduk-balaṭu drew. They will make [diaries of] observations and produce the yearly astronomical tables together with the astronomers Belshunu, La-abash, Muranu, Iddin-Bel, Bel-naširshu, and other astronomers.

***Cuneiform scholarship.*** The number of extant cuneiform tablets of the Hellenistic period has been estimated at more than two thousand, of which well over one thousand are of astronomical content (Oelsner 1986: 138). This gives a good indication of the predominant use to which Akkadian was put in the last centuries of the cuneiform tradition. Astrologer-astronomers must have formed the majority of scholars still writing the language at this time. Akkadian in the Seleucid and Parthian periods was, like Sumerian before it, a scholars' language that had to be learned by a long apprenticeship. The art of writing it was inextricably bound up with the survival of the ancient temples and the duties of their personnel, especially the astronomers. As populations moved away from the old cities to the new royal capitals at Seleucia and then Ctesiphon, and royal patronage and funding came to an end, these buildings became increasingly difficult to maintain. At the same time the people that staffed them and otherwise relied on them for support must have decreased rapidly.

Alongside the diminishing archival documentation of the Persian, Seleucid and Parthian periods, production of new copies of texts of the old Sumero-Babylonian scribal tradition continued, especially at Babylon, Borsippa and Uruk. Much of this was carried out as part of their education by boys and young men learning to write in order to enter the literate professions. Though few new texts were written, there is plentiful evidence that in the 4th century BC Akkadian was still the vehicle for a flourishing intellectual culture, particularly in the exegesis of professional lore (Frahm 2002). By the Parthian era, however, cuneiform learning was much less widespread. It was the preserve only of a few families of learned scholars, mostly astronomers, clinging to the ancient ways in cities that history had passed by. The latest dated copy of a text of the old scribal tradition known at present was written at Babylon in 35 BC (Oelsner 2002a: 12). It is an apprentice's manuscript of a literary prayer to Marduk. Undated copies of literary texts far outnumber dated exemplars and it is not improbable that we possess many other literary tablets of the same period. Some may even date from as late as the astronomical almanacs. These almanacs are, at present, our very last dated cuneiform documents. The most recent of them contains predictions of planetary movements and other events for AD 75. The almanacs are ostensibly written in Akkadian and prefaced with a standard scribal prayer in Babylonian, but whether they had to be read in that language is uncertain: the stereotyped and abbreviated formulae in which they are couched is a kind of scholarly code, readable in any language by anyone with a little training.

Whoever wrote the almanacs, however, must have had some grasp of the Akkadian language, for they were surely trained to write cuneiform in the time-honoured way, by exposure to the Sumero-Babylonian scribal tradition. Relics from their education may even survive in the form of school tablets from Babylon that hold passages of Sumerian and Akkadian texts in cuneiform accompanied by Greek transcriptions. These have been dated on the basis of palaeography mostly to the two centuries either side of the turn of the era, but one or two examples may be later still. Partly on this evidence it has been argued that cuneiform culture, and thus written Babylonian, survived to the 2nd century AD and even into the 3rd, when many old

traditions were finally extinguished by the religious reforms of the Sasanian Persians, who had put an end to Parthian rule in Mesopotamia by AD 230 (Geller 1997).

Without a breakthrough in cuneiform palaeography it remains to be seen whether any of the many undated cuneiform copies of texts from the Late Babylonian scribal tradition could be as late as the 2nd century AD. As matters stand, this seems unlikely but it would be unwise completely to discount it. Two events, perhaps interconnected, contributed greatly to the end of the cuneiform tradition of native scholarship in Babylonia, and so to the final demise of Akkadian. The transfer of astronomical writing to a medium other than cuneiform was one (Brown forthcoming). The decline of the venerable cult-centres was the other. Though there is evidence that the cults of some of the old gods survived into the 3rd century AD, they must by then have been relocated. Archaeological excavation shows that the great temple buildings of Uruk were abandoned and built over soon after about 100 BC, at all events early in the Parthian period. At Babylon the ancient cult-centre of Marduk (Bel) and other sanctuaries endured longer. Marduk's temple was ruined, levelled into a mound and redeveloped as a residential quarter some time before the Parthian era closed in the early 3rd century AD.

Some have speculated that a tradition of Sumero-Babylonian scholarship — and with it a reading knowledge of Akkadian — survived the death of the cuneiform script in Greek and Aramaic transcriptions written on scrolls of papyrus and leather, now perished (e.g. Oelsner 2002a: 30-1). Late allusions to Babylonian language and learning, for example by the scholiast who credits the Greek novelist Iamblichus (fl. AD 200), a native-speaker of Syriac, with a knowledge of the “Babylonian language” (Geller 1997: 50), might speak for a continuing endurance of learned Akkadian, whether read from cuneiform tablets or from scrolls. Others have argued, however, that allusions to Mesopotamian learning in the Roman period refer not to the old Sumero-Akkadian tradition but to a contemporaneous “pagan Aramaic literature” that is now lost (Houston *et al.* 2003: 456). We will probably never know. The end of written Akkadian, then, is not clearly visible in history.

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