HAMMURABI'S HOME AND LANGUAGE

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Scholars believe that Hammurabi may have started the building of Etemenanki (also referred to as the "Tower of Babel"). This artist's conception of how the ziggurat may have appeared is online, courtesy the Iraqi Embassy's website. PD

Hammurabi was an efficient organizer. When he became king in 1792 BC, not only did he unify the city-states of Mesopotamia, he helped to make Babylon one of the greatest cities of the ancient world.

Streets in his town seem to have been laid-out in straight lines, and they intersect at right angles. He dug a great canal between Kish (a city just south of Babylon) and the Persian Gulf to irrigate the land and to protect against floods. It is difficult to believe that all of these engineering feats took place 3700 years ago!

However, one thing Hammurabi did *not* have was paper. How did people write without paper? They would inscribe words on wet clay. Their writing looks like wedges to us, so scholars today refer to their method of writing as cuneiform (based on the Latin word for wedge - *cuneus*).

To be clear, cuneiform is just a method of writing. It's the script ancient people used to write down their thoughts before they had paper. Hammurabi didn't speak "cuneiform" - he spoke a language called "Akkadian."

How did Akkadian and cuneiform writing work together?

Think about the alphabet, which English speakers and writers use, as a kind of script. Other people use letters from that same alphabet to create non-English words. Hammurabi's spoken language (Akkadian) and cuneiform (his method of writing) worked together in that same fashion.

In addition, Hammurabi's language (when it was put on clay tablets) relied on all kinds of other symbols carried over from the ancient Sumerian language. Because it incorporated more symbols (about 500) than other ancient languages using cuneiform, Akkadian (the language of Babylon) would be difficult to translate. (More about that in the next chapter.)

Babylonian scribes wrote in columns, beginning on the left side of a clay tablet. When the entire side of the tablet was filled (moving from left to right), the scribe would turn it over from the bottom (not from the side, like we turn a page).

Once the tablet was turned over, the scribe would begin to create his strokes (depicted by the man on the right) in columns again, but this time he would move from right to left.

Visitors to the old region of Persia and Mesopotamia began to find cuneiform clay tablets in the 1600s. Scholars who saw them did not believe the inscriptions represented a system of writing. At first they thought the tablets might be games or ornaments.

Not until 1686, when a physician (E. Kaempfer) visited ruins of the ancient Persian city Persepolis did anyone think the tablets actually communicated words.

But what did the words say? Nobody knew.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/HAMMURABI-S-HOME-AND-LANGUAGE-Hammurabi-and-His-Code-of-Laws

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/HAMMURABI-S-HOME-AND-LANGUAGE-Hammurabi-and-His-Code-of-Laws

Media Stream

Cunieform Writing - Bill of Sale

Image of Tablet 34, a cunieform-written Bill of Sale, maintained at the Library of Congress. Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

PD

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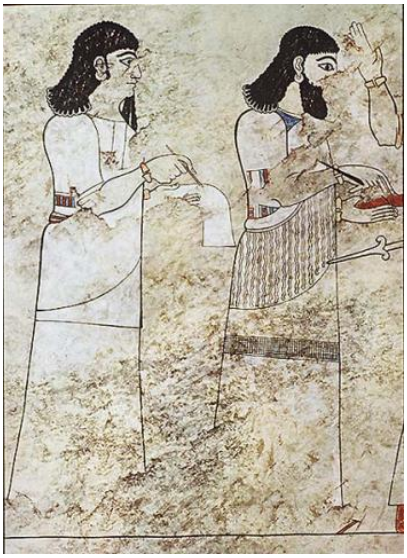
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Cunieform-Writing-Bill-of-Sale



Assyrian Scribes

Image included at p. 33, Henrietta McCall's *Mesopotamian Myths*. 1990, 1993. London. British Museum Publications in cooperation with the University of Texas Press, Austin). Online courtesy the bibleorigins.net website.

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