

## CHAPTER 1

# Language in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Aksum: an introduction

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## Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land  
 Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
 Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,  
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
 The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed;  
 And on the pedestal these words appear:  
 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
 Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare  
 The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Cicero, that consummate philosopher–statesman of the late Roman Republic, wrote in his theological treatise on the nature of the gods:

A great many different opportune circumstances are found in a variety of places promoting abundant cultivation by humankind. The Nile waters Egypt – after completely inundating the place all summer long it recedes and leaves the fields soft and covered with mud, ready for sowing. Mesopotamia is made fertile by the Euphrates, each year introducing new fields, as it were . . . How great is the bountifulness of nature, teaming with so great and so pleasing a variety of sustenance . . .! (*De natura deorum* 2.130–131)

Mesopotamia – bending with the course of both the Euphrates and the Tigris, cutting a curving swath across southwest Asia, from modern Turkey and Syria in the northwest to Iraq in the southeast – and Egypt – the tomb-studded conduit of the Nile, Ozymandias' land – trace their histories along the life-giving rivers that define them. It is in these two ancient, ancient places – Mesopotamia and Egypt – that the first evidence of human writing reveals itself and, hence, the earliest recorded words and syllables of human speech appear. In the second half of the fourth millennium BC, each place gave birth to its own form of writing – curving pictographs that would evolve into cuneiform wedges – and elaborate hieroglyphs that would survive for millennia, while spawning, even as they lived on, cursive

offspring better suited for scribal alacrity. These, the first frozen forms of human language, locked in brittle paint and crumbling etch (though not the earliest human language we can recover) are little more than newcomers in the great gulf that is human linguistic history; far more ancient speech once broke upon the ears of a distant human form – peoples whose prehistorically painted symbols mark still the deep darkness of the cavernous spaces of earth, but without encoding language – their tongues were lost forever many millennia ago.

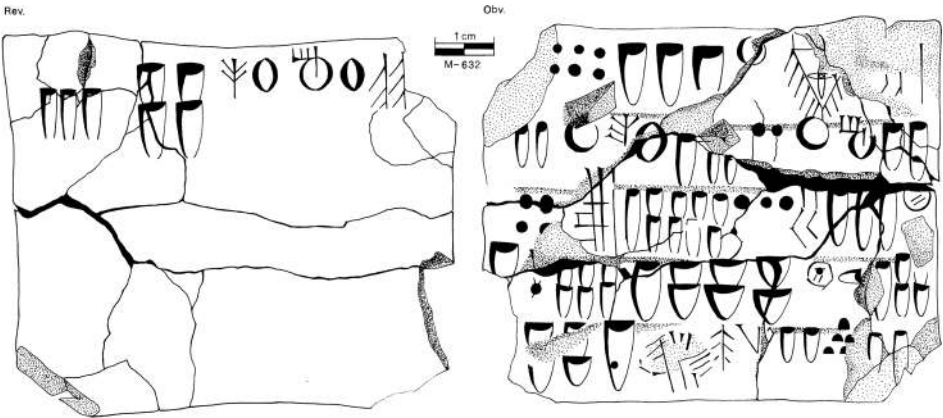
Mesopotamia and Egypt – these are places immediately familiar to many readers from the Bible – and very probably no less so from the headlines of *The Times* or the *Post*. In the Biblical books of Genesis and Exodus one reads of the patriarch Abraham who left his home in Mesopotamia (in “Ur of the Chaldeans”) and journeyed, in time, into Egypt, and then out again when compelled by Pharaoh to go, and of his descendant Moses, born in Egypt, who led his Hebrew kinsmen out of Egyptian captivity, who received from God on Mt. Sinai stone tablets engraved with Ten Commandments, and who caused to be constructed for their transport to a Promised Land a chest of gilded acacia wood called the Ark of the Covenant.

But one must look to a much later book to find an account that relates the fate of those tablets and the chest that held them, a book of medieval origin. According to the Ge’ez epic *Kəbrä Nəgäst* (*Glory of Kings*; see Ch. 6, §1.3), echoing and amplifying Biblical, Islamic and Classical accounts of the Queen of Sheba’s visit to King Solomon of Israel, this “Queen of the South” conceived a child by Solomon – a son, Menelik, born after the queen had returned to her kingdom. When grown to be a young man, Menelik journeyed to Jerusalem to see his father; upon Menelik’s departure for Ethiopia, where he would become king, Solomon sent with him a retinue composed of the oldest sons of prominent members of the Israelite community. But as this delegation left Jerusalem, they took with them the holy Ark, which, according to Ethiopian tradition, remains to this day in the ancient city of Aksum (see, *inter alia*, Ullendorff 2006).

In the early centuries AD, as the Roman Empire waned, an Aksumite Kingdom (Christian, by the early fourth century) took form and spread its realm of influence to such an extent that already in the third century the Persian teacher Mani could write that the world had four great kingdoms: Babylonian, Persian, Chinese, and Aksumite. But in comparison to the empires of Egypt and Mesopotamia, Aksum’s power would be short-lived, withdrawing into the arid landscape of Ethiopia by the seventh century, as Islamic powers waxed.

Mesopotamia, Egypt, Aksum – it is to the languages of the peoples of these ancient places that this volume is dedicated. Of the three, Mesopotamia is linguistically the most diverse. Sumerian, Mesopotamia’s earliest recorded (and deciphered) language, is a *language isolate*, having no known linguistic relatives among the remainder of the world’s languages. Within the Mesopotamian sphere, however, Sumerian is not unique in this regard.

As a geographical entity, “Mesopotamia” has a distinctive form. According to Eratosthenes of Cyrene, the third-century BC Greek polymath who took his turn as head of the famed library in Alexandria (Egypt), Mesopotamia is “shaped like a boat” (α ὑπηρέσιον; Strabo 2.1.23, 26); since the time of the nineteenth-/twentieth-century Chicago Orientalist James Breasted, a more familiar description is that of one arcing aspect of a fertile “crescent.” If the shape is distinctive, the edges of this space are somewhat vaguely delineated. Even so, along its southeastern circumference, Mesopotamia’s boundary is commonly identified with the Zagros Mountains, lying within the modern political state of Iran. On the western side of the Zagros range, situated on the plains of Khuzestān, along the Shaur River, lies the ancient city of Susa, one of the chief cities of the people called the Elamites. As throughout much of their history the Elamites formed part of the cultural milieu of Mesopotamia – utilizing, for example, the Mesopotamian cuneiform script (see the Appendix at the end of Ch. 4) – often subduing or being subdued by the peoples who lived nearer the banks of the



**Figure 1.1** Proto-Elamite tablet

Tigris and Euphrates, Elamite will be treated herein among the “Mesopotamian languages.” The boundary of the Mesopotamian and Iranian regions is, however, diffuse – now, as in antiquity – and Elam and Elamite also figure prominently in the cultural and linguistic history of Iran: thus, for example, during the period of the Achaemenid dynasty (on which, see the Introduction to *The Ancient Languages of Asia and the Americas*), Susa became a Persian royal city, and in the famous inscription of the Persian King Darius I engraved in living rock at Bisitūn (see Ch. 3, §1.2.4.1; WAL Ch. 28, *passim* and especially §2.3), three languages are used for the decree – Elamite, Old Persian, and the Mesopotamian language of Babylonian.

Elamite shares with Sumerian the status of “language isolate.” We should note, however, in this regard, the occurrence of two undeciphered scripts in the documentary remains of the ancient Elamite region. The earliest known of all presently undeciphered scripts (dating to the late fourth millennium BC) is that one called *Proto-Elamite* (see Fig. 1.1). Far fewer in number are inscriptions written in the script called *Linear Elamite*. For a discussion of these, see Chapter 3, §§2.1–2.2.

The majority of the several languages of ancient Mesopotamia are members of the Semitic linguistic family – specifically, the East Semitic, Akkadian languages. This group is comprised of Old Akkadian from the second half of the third millennium BC, and the subsequent Assyrian and Babylonian languages (geographically distributed in the north and south of Mesopotamia, respectively), each divided into several historical phases, beginning in about 2000 BC. The enormity of the documentary evidence for the Akkadian languages can only be described as nothing less than stunning.

In northern Syria, beyond the pale of Mesopotamia proper, lies Tell Mardikh, location of the ancient city of Ebla. It was only in the late 1960s that archeologists discovered this remarkable site, though the place name Ebla had long been known from Akkadian documents. With the discovery of the site came the addition of yet another member to the Semitic family of languages, the language dubbed *Eblaite*. At first believed to be a West Semitic language, like Hebrew, further study has revealed an apparent close kinship between Eblaite and Old Akkadian; hence Eblaite will also be treated in this volume, together with the Akkadian languages.

Among the fascinations that Egypt held for the Greek historian Herodotus, one was its proclivity for inverting the common order of things: “The Egyptians, along with having a climate of their very own and a river different in nature from any other, have established customs and habits that differ almost completely from those of all other people” (*Histories* 2.35). Herodotus then lists for his readers some of these unique practices: “Among them

Table 1.1 Characters of the Meroitic script					
Character		Transcription	Character		Transcription
Hieroglyphic	Cursive		Hieroglyphic	Cursive	
		a			l
		e			h
		i			h
		o			s
		y			se
		w			k
		b			q
		p			t
		m			te
		n			to
		ne			d
		r			word-divider

[i.e. the Egyptians], the women venture into the market place and sell wares but the men stay at home and weave – and whereas other people weave by pushing the woof upward, the Egyptians push it downward.” The listing goes on – eventually touching on the matter of language, if only indirectly: “While the Greeks write letters and do arithmetic computations by moving the hand from left to right, the Egyptians do it from right to left. And they use two kinds of letters – they call one ‘sacred’ [i.e. hieroglyphic] and the other demotic” (*Histories* 2.36).

Herodotus’ two types of Egyptian “letters” (γράμματα) are, in actuality, three types: in addition to the well-known intricate hieroglyphic symbols (see the Appendix at the end of Ch. 5), the Egyptians used two cursive scripts derived from the hieroglyphic: Hieratic and, as Herodotus records, Demotic (on all three, see Ch. 5, §2.1). While ancient Egypt thus knows a diversity of writing systems, the degree of language diversity that we encountered in Mesopotamia is not replicated in the documentary record of Egypt, though distinct chronological stages of Egyptian can be identified, from Old Egyptian to Coptic, the latter giving evidence of several dialects. The notable exception to this relative linguistic homogeneity is provided by the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions found in the Sinai Peninsula and, more recently, in Upper Egypt at Wadi el-Hol, across the Nile from ancient Thebes; these appear to preserve a Bronze Age variety of a West Semitic language (see WAL Ch. 12, §2.2 and the Introduction to the companion volume *The Ancient Languages of Syria-Palestine and Arabia*).

There are, nevertheless, other ancient languages attested in North Africa. The *Ancient Libyan* or *Numidian* script, or scripts, from Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco have been interpreted as recording archaic Berber, though some scholars would regard these materials to be still undeciphered (see WAL Ch. 6, §1.1.3). On these scripts, see, *inter alia*, O’Connor 1996.

Between the Fifth and Sixth Cataracts of the Nile lay the ancient Nubian city of Meroë, where the Egyptian scripts must have been long known and utilized. By the third century BC, however, with the rise of the Meroitic kingdom, a native writing system appeared (having both a hieroglyphic and a cursive form), influenced by the Egyptian, and continued in use for recording Meroitic language until the fourth century AD, when Meroë collapsed under external pressures, chiefly from Aksum. The phonetic values of the symbols of the Meroitic writing system have been purportedly identified, as shown in Table 1.1. The majority of

symbols have been assigned the value of a single consonant or vowel sound (i.e., the script is analyzed as fundamentally alphabetic), with a small set of syllabic CV (consonant + vowel) symbols filling out the inventory of characters (compare Ugaritic's consonantal script supplemented by three CV characters; see WAL Ch. 9, §2.2). While Meroitic texts can thus be given a phonetic reading, the language uttered in such a reading cannot be understood with the exception of a very few words, chiefly proper nouns. On the Meroitic script and language, see Wenig 1982, Griffith 1911, 1912.

The above mention of Aksum returns our attention to that Ethiopian kingdom, to the Aksumite epic, the *Kəbrä Nəgäst*, and to the language in which the epic was composed, the language of Ge'ez – one of the focal points of this volume. Ge'ez is a Semitic language, closely related to Ancient South Arabian (see Ch. 6, §1.2; for the Ancient South Arabian language, Ch. 7 in *The Ancient Languages of Syria-Palestine and Arabia*), the latter perhaps the language of Solomon's Queen of Sheba (though the period of Solomon's reign precedes the earliest known South Arabian inscriptions by some two centuries). Ge'ez thus belongs to the same language family as the Akkadian languages of Mesopotamia – the Semitic family – but both also bear a genetic relationship to Egyptian: Semitic and Egyptian are themselves branches of the larger Afro-Asiatic language family, as is discussed in the Appendix on Afro-Asiatic found at the end of the companion volume, *The Ancient Languages of Syria-Palestine and Arabia*.

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