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978-1-107-48665-2 - They Wrote on Clay: The Babylonian Tablets Speak To-Day

Edited by Edward Chiera and George G. Cameron

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# THEY WROTE ON CLAY

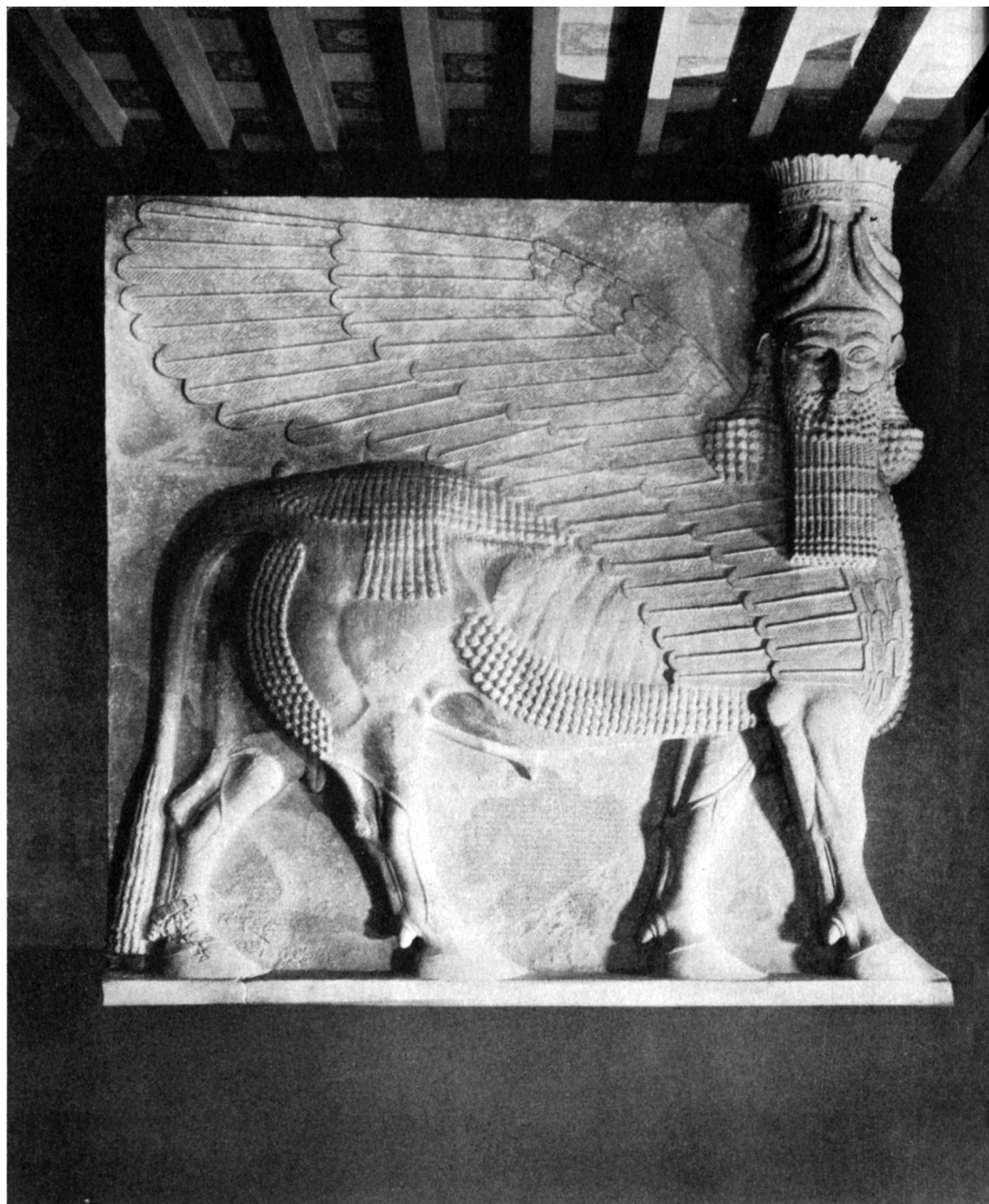
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*The Babylonian Tablets Speak To-day*

by

EDWARD CHIERA

*Late Professor of Assyriology*

*The University of Chicago*

Edited by

GEORGE G. CAMERON

*Instructor in Oriental Languages*

*The University of Chicago*



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## Preface

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ONE day Professor Chiera was guiding some visitors through the exhibition halls of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. They stopped first in front of the huge Assyrian bull or “cherub,” which he himself had found and brought to this country, then passed through the Assyrian Hall containing the massive stone reliefs from the palace of Sargon of Assyria. As they turned to enter the room containing the ancient clay tablets and records, one of the members of the party chanced to remark, “Now that we’ve seen the most interesting things, let’s rush through here as quickly as possible.”

That was so typical of the average attitude toward Babylonian-Assyrian discoveries that Professor Chiera, stopping short, said, “Wait a minute! The real interest starts here,” and proceeded to discuss some of the important information that we may secure from these ancient “books of clay.” This volume is an enlargement of the talk he gave there.

It is not difficult to explain this attitude on the part of the visitor to the museum, for there is a glamour, an irresistible fascination, about magnificent gold objects from Ur of the Chaldees, exquisitely carved ivories from Megiddo or Armageddon, or stupendous reliefs from ancient Persepolis. We forget so easily that these, and the

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minor finds of archeology, could tell but half a tale without the inscriptions; that they and the texts on clay, stone, and parchment are mutually complementary; that the one interprets the other and is incomplete without the other.

Yet the lure of these more obvious archeological finds is only partly the cause of the comparative obscurity under which the records of the past labor. We, who pride ourselves on being "Assyriologists," are to blame also. We have lost touch with the public because we have been unable to see beyond our own noses. We have been so wrapped up in our linguistic and historical "research" that only recently has it begun to dawn upon us that if the results we have attained are interesting to us they would also be of interest to the intelligent man engaged in other lines of endeavor. Gradually we are becoming aware that outsiders would like to know what relationship Assyriology can possibly have to their own lives.

Our previous lack of contact outside the field is due likewise to our youth. It is but a hundred years since an intrepid adventurer clambered up the face of a perilous rock to secure for us the means wherewith our science might advance. So young are we that our very terminology is inept. Few there are indeed who know that the name of our science, "Assyriology," is based on an accident—the fact that the first large group of texts ever discovered was written in Assyrian. Few are aware that Assyrian itself is but one dialect, Babylonian another, of a language which is called, in our esoteric circles, "Ak-kadian."

But however remote the activities of Assyriologists may

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have seemed to the public in the past, today the workers in this field are keen to bring home to the layman the significance of their labors. And Professor Chiera, through his combination of brilliant scholarship and gift of felicitous presentation of his subject, was especially well adapted to render this service. It is, therefore, regrettable that his untimely death prevented him from realizing his dream of sharing with the public at large his interest in and knowledge of the fascinating records of men who lived millenniums ago.

Fortunately, before his last illness he had written the first draft of a book intended for this purpose. Friends urged its posthumous publication, and at the request of Mrs. Chiera I have prepared this edition. In it I have endeavored to retain as far as possible Professor Chiera's style and method of presentation. We may be sure that the talk he gave that day in the museum halls was well received; let us hope that this edition of the book which he left unfinished will meet with a similar reception.

GEORGE G. CAMERON

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS  
January 3, 1938

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# Prologue

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## FROM A LETTER OF THE AUTHOR TO HIS WIFE

*This evening I made my usual pilgrimage to the mound covering the ancient temple tower. It is only a few hundred yards from our camp, and it is pleasant to ascend to the summit of that tower, which dominates the landscape. This I generally do in the evening, after supper, in the bright moonlight. Today I have come with the ambition of jotting down my impressions, for the spectacle moves me deeply.*

*Seen from below, it does not look so high as might be expected of a Babylonian temple tower. Did not that of Babylon pretend to reach to heaven? One gets the answer after ascending it. Though rather low (it can hardly be more than five hundred feet), still from the top the eye sweeps over an enormous distance on the boundless, flat plain. Nothing breaks the view, and the plain finally melts into the horizon. About twenty miles away rises the high mound of Cutha. This city was sacred to Nergal, the god of pestilence and of the underworld. The ruins of Babylon are nearer. All around the tower small heaps of dirt represent all that remains of Kish, one of the oldest cities of Mesopotamia.*

*On all sides is desert. The yellowish soil is arid and thirsty, and no plant can survive the parching heat of the summer; sheep and camels must feed on whatever remains of the grass that has*

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*managed to sprout in the few weeks after the rains. The large network of canals, which in ancient times distributed the waters of the Euphrates over all this land, is now represented by a series of small mounds of dirt, running in all directions. Even the Euphrates has abandoned this land by changing its course. In ancient times it came very near to the city, giving water in abundance and affording an easy way of communication.*

*But man has not yet forsaken this place and still tries to wrest something from the avaricious ground. A mile away an Arab peasant, chanting a plaintive song, is urging on two skinny donkeys that pull a primitive plow. He is placing his trust in the coming rains, hoping these may help multiply the few grains of barley that he will throw into the shallow furrow. If the rains should fail, so will the bread in his house. He works without energy, and the plow wriggles uncertainly over the plain.*

*Immediately before me, and all around the tower, are the deep trenches made during last year's excavation. It is getting darker, and they are not well defined. But at night, with a full moon, they appear pitch black and bottomless—a line of defense around the sacred mountain, ready to swallow whoever should attempt to approach it. The sun has just now disappeared, and a purple sky smiles, unmindful of this scene of desolation. The cool evening breeze attempts to tear away from my hand the sheet of paper on which I write these notes.*

*A dead city! I have visited Pompeii and Ostia, and I have taken walks along the empty corridors of the Palatine. But those cities are not dead: they are only temporarily abandoned. The*

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*hum of life is still heard, and life blooms all around. They are but a step in the progress of that civilization to which they have contributed their full share and which marches on, under their very eyes.*

*Here only is real death. Not a column or an arch still stands to demonstrate the permanency of human work. Everything has crumbled into dust. The very temple tower, the most imposing of all these ancient constructions, has entirely lost its original shape. Where are now its seven stages? Where the large stairway that led to the top? Where the shrine that crowned it? We see nothing but a mound of earth—all that remains of the millions of its bricks. On the very top some traces of walls. But these are shapeless: time and neglect have completed their work.*

*Under my feet are some holes which have been burrowed by foxes and jackals. At night they descend stealthily from their haunts in their difficult search for food, and appear silhouetted against the sky. This evening they appear to sense my presence and stay in hiding, perhaps wondering at this stranger who has come to disturb their peace. The mound is covered with white bones which represent the accumulated evidence of their hunts.*

*It is beginning to be really dark, and the plaintive song of the Arab has ceased. Nothing breaks the deathly silence. Cutha and Babylon have been swallowed by the darkness. In the distance some lights appear, and I can distinguish those of a village of “friendly” Arabs who are employed in the excavation. Farther away is an encampment of Beduins, here considered as enemies. To us they represent an element of danger, for they are, born*

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*thieves. But I who have accepted their hospitality and drunk their coffee, made with dirty water and served in cups that are never washed, cannot call them enemies. They have been so trusting that they even let me take some photographs of them, a favor rarely obtained from the Beduins of the desert: who knows what danger might threaten if these should be used in black magic? They are friends, therefore, in so far as they can be friends of a foreigner and unbeliever.*

*A jackal is now sending forth his howl, half-cry and half-threat. All the dogs of the Arab village immediately take up his challenge, and for a moment the peace is upset by howling and barking.*

*It is now quite dark. Caution would advise descending immediately to avoid the danger of falling into one of the many trenches. But a certain fascination holds me here. I should like to find a reason for all this desolation. Why should a flourishing city, the seat of an empire, have completely disappeared? Is it the fulfilment of a prophetic curse that changed a superb temple into a den of jackals? Did the actions of the people who lived here have anything to do with this, or is it the fatal destiny of mankind that all its civilizations must crumble when they reach their peak? And what are we doing here, trying to wrest from the past its secrets, when probably we ourselves and our own achievements may become an object of search for peoples to come?*

*I have to descend now. The moon has not yet risen, and had not my frequent visits taught me the right path to follow, the descent would be really dangerous. Still absorbed in my thoughts*

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*I feel no desire to break up their course by joining my friends. In the semiobscurity I walk toward the open country and the ruins, still untouched, of the ancient city. The ground is soft, being made up entirely of the debris of centuries, and at times my foot sinks in it up to the ankle. Here the ancient habitations, with their mysteries and their tombs, have been sleeping quietly for millenniums. In a few months, perhaps in a few days, here also the ground will be broken by trenches as in a battlefield. And the repose of the poor dead will be disturbed by the frantic search for records and data. . . . .*