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978-1-108-07747-7 - A Commentary on the Cuneiform Inscriptions of Babylonia and Assyria: Including Readings of the Inscription on the Nimrud Obelisk, and a Brief Notice of the Ancient Kings of Nineveh and Babylon

Henry Creswicke Rawlinson

Excerpt

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ON THE
INSCRIPTIONS OF ASSYRIA AND BABYLONIA.

PRELIMINARY NOTICE.

WHEN I drew up the following Notes upon the Inscriptions of Babylonia and Assyria, and read them at the Royal Asiatic Society's Meetings of January 19th, and February 16th, I had no intention of publishing them in their present form. I merely wished, as much interest had been excited by the exhibition of the Nineveh marbles, to satisfy public curiosity, by presenting at once, and in a popular shape, a general view of the results at which I had arrived in my labours on the Inscriptions; and I judged that this object would be more conveniently attained by oral communication than by publication in the pages of a Scientific Journal. At the same time, of course, I proposed to follow up the oral communication, by publishing with the least practicable delay, a full exposition of the machinery which I had employed both for deciphering and rendering intelligible the Inscriptions, and during the interval which would thus elapse between announcement and proof, I trusted that, if inquiry were not altogether suspended, philologists and palæographers would, at any rate, refrain from pronouncing upon the validity of my system of interpretation.

It has since, however, been suggested to me, that much inconvenience may arise from this partition of the subject. Weeks, perhaps months, will be required to carry through the press the Memoir in its complete state, and with all its typographical illustrations; and if, accordingly, upon the date of the appearance of the Memoir in print were made to depend the originality of the matter contained in it, my claim to a priority of, or even to independent, discovery might be very seriously endangered; for many inquirers are known to be already in the field, and the clue afforded to the rectification of phonetic values by the numerous readings which I have given in my Lectures of proper names, both historical and geographical, might thus lead to

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Henry Creswicke Rawlinson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

ON THE INSCRIPTIONS OF

the announcement in other quarters of the same results, in anticipation of the publication of my own translations. Without wishing then to impute any spirit of unfairness to the parties with whom I am competing, with every disposition indeed to unite cordially with them in disentangling the very intricate questions upon which we are engaged, I now think it advisable, for the due authentication of my own researches, to place on record the various discoveries, philological, historical, and geographical, in connection with the Inscriptions of Assyria and Babylonia, which I announced to the Royal Asiatic Society upon January 19th, and February 16th of the present year; and I venture accordingly, notwithstanding their popular character, to print the Lectures delivered on those occasions; merely transposing the arrangement of the materials so as to form a continuous sketch, and appending, in a series of notes, such illustrations as appear indispensable to a proper intelligence of the subject.

H. C. R.

March 1, 1850.

Notes on the Inscriptions of Assyria and Babylonia; read at the Royal Asiatic Society's Meetings of 19th January and 16th February, 1850.

BEFORE undertaking the investigation of the obscure subject of Assyrian history, I propose to explain briefly the means by which the Inscriptions of Nineveh and Babylon have been rendered legible, and to take a cursory view of the nature and structure of the alphabet employed in them. It will also, I think, be desirable to notice such characteristics of grammar and of speech, as shall be sufficient to satisfy philologers, that there are ample grounds for classing the ancient vernacular dialects of the Tigris and the Euphrates with that family of languages that we are accustomed to term Semitic, and which will perhaps further show, that the connection of the Assyrian and Babylonian is almost as close with the African, as with the Asiatic branch of the so-called Semitic family.

I commence with an explanation of the process of decipherment. There are found in many parts of Persia, either graven on the native rock, as at Hamadan, at Van, and Behistun, or sculptured on the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ASSYRIA AND BABYLONIA.

3

walls of the ancient palaces, as at Persepolis and Pasargadæ, Cuneiform Inscriptions which record the glories of the House of Achæmenes. These Inscriptions are, in almost every instance, trilingual and trilateral. They are engraved in three different languages, and each language has its peculiar alphabet; the alphabets, indeed, varying from each other, not merely in the characters being formed by a different assortment of the elemental signs which we are accustomed to term the arrow-head and wedge, but in their whole phonetic structure and organization. The object, of course, of engraving the records in three different languages was to render them generally intelligible. Precisely, indeed, as at the present day, a Governor of Baghdad, who wished to publish an edict for general information, would be obliged to employ three languages, the Persian, Turkish, and Arabic; so in the time of Cyrus and Darius, when the ethnographical constitution of the empire was subject to the same general division, was it necessary to address the population in the three different languages from which have sprung the modern Persian, Turkish, and Arabic, or at any rate in the three languages which represented at the time those three great lingual families. To this fashion, then, or necessity of triple publication, are we indebted for our knowledge of the Assyrian Inscriptions. I need not describe the steps by which the Persian Cuneiform Alphabet was first deciphered and the language was subsequently brought to light, for full details have been already published in the Society's Journal; but I may notice as an illustration of the great success which has attended the efforts of myself and other students in this preliminary branch of the inquiry, that there are probably not more than twenty words in the whole range of the Persian Cuneiform records, upon the meaning, grammatical condition, or etymology of which, any doubt or difference of opinion can be said at present to exist.

As the Greek translation, then, on the Rosetta Stone first led the way to the decipherment of the hieroglyphic writing of Egypt, so have the Persian texts of the trilingual Cuneiform tablets served as a stepping-stone to the intelligence of the Assyrian and Babylonian Inscriptions. The tablets of Behistun, of Nakhsh-i-Rustam, and Persepolis, have in the first place furnished a list of more than eighty proper names, of which the true pronunciation is fixed by their Persian orthography, and of which we have also the Babylonian equivalents. A careful comparison of these duplicate forms of writing the same name, and a due appreciation of the phonetic distinctions peculiar to the two languages, have then supplied the means of determining with more or less of certainty, the value of about one hundred Babylonian

B 2

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

characters, and a very excellent basis has been thus determined for a complete arrangement of the Alphabet. The next step has been to collate Inscriptions, and to ascertain or infer from the variant orthographies of the same name, (and particularly the same geographical name) the homophones of each known alphabetical power. In this stage of the inquiry much caution, or, if I may so call it, "*critique*," has been rendered necessary; for although two Inscriptions may be absolutely identical in sense, and even in expression, it does not by any means follow that wherever one text may differ from the other, we are justified in supposing that we have found alphabetical variants. Many sources of variety exist, besides the employment of homophones. Ideographs or abbreviations may be substituted for words expressed phonetically; sometimes the allocation is altered; sometimes synonyms are made use of; grammatical suffixes and affixes again may be employed or suppressed, or modified at option. It requires, in fact, a most ample field of comparison, a certain familiarity with the language, and, above all, much experience in the dialectic changes, and in the varieties of alphabetical expression, before variant characters can be determined with any certainty. By mere comparison, however, repeated in a multitude of instances, so as to reduce almost infinitely the chance of error, I have added nearly fifty characters to the hundred which were previously known through the Persian key; and to this acquaintance with the phonetic value of about one hundred and fifty signs, is, I believe, limited my present knowledge of the Babylonian and Assyrian alphabets.

I will now offer a few remarks on the nature and structure of these alphabets. That the employment of the Cuneiform character originated in Assyria, while the system of writing to which it was adapted was borrowed from Egypt, will hardly admit of question. Whether the Cuneiform letters, in their primitive shapes, were intended like the hieroglyphs to represent actual objects, and were afterwards degraded to their present forms; or whether the point of departure was from the Hieratic, or perhaps the Demotic character, the first change from a picture to a sign having thus taken place before Assyria formed her alphabet, I will not undertake to decide; but the whole structure of the Assyrian graphic system evidently betrays an Egyptian origin. The alphabet is partly ideographic and partly phonetic, and the phonetic signs are in some cases syllabic, and in others literal. Where a sign represents a syllable, I conjecture that the syllable in question may have been the specific name of the object which the sign was supposed to depict; whilst in cases where a single alphabetical power appertains to the sign, it would seem as if that power

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


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






Henry Creswicke Rawlinson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

had been the dominant sound in the name of the object. In this way, at any rate, are we alone, I think, able to account for the anomalous condition of many of the Assyrian signs, which sometimes represent phonetically a complete syllable, and sometimes one only of the sounds of which the syllable is composed¹. It cannot certainly be maintained that the phonetic portion of the alphabet is altogether syllabic, or, that every phonetic sign represents a complete and uniform articulation. There is, it may be admitted, an extensive syllabarium, but at the same time many of the characters can only be explained as single consonants. These characters again may be usually distinguished as initial and terminal; that is, the vowel sound which is their necessary accompaniment, and which must be supplied according to the requirements of the language, precedes one class of signs and follows another, but in a few instances the character may be employed either to open or close an articulation indifferently; and the entire phonetic structure is thus shown to be in so rude and elementary a state, as to defy the attempt to reduce it to any definite system. A still more formidable difficulty, one, indeed, of which I can only remotely conjecture the explanation, is, that certain characters represent two entirely dissimilar sounds,—sounds so dissimilar, that neither can they be brought into relation with each other, nor, even supposing the sign properly to denote a syllable, which syllable on occasion may be compressed into its dominant sound, will the other power be found to enter at all into the full and original articulation².

¹ There are thus a series of characters which fluctuate between *t* and *b*, such as , , , &c. They represent sometimes the complete syllable, but more usually one only of the component sounds. They may perhaps be illustrated by a comparison with the Sanskrit द्विः, which has produced द्वि in Greek, and *bis* in Latin. Many other characters also have double powers; the  represents indifferently the *r* and *s*, and at Behistun the  for *t*, is undistinguishable from the sign which answers to *Par*.

² I take for an example the character . This sign certainly represents phonetically an *aleph*, א, but it is also the ideograph for “a son,” and in that capacity must, I think, be sounded *bar*. The same sound of *bar* would seem to appertain to it in the name of the Euphrates, where as the initial sign it replaces  *b*, or  *bar*, but as the final letter of the name of Nineveh (   or   ) it must be a simple labial; while in the names of Nabopolassar, (the father of Nebuchadnezzar) and Sardanapalus, we must give to the sign in question the pronunciation of *pal*, that articulation, pro-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Some of these anomalies belong to the graphic system of Egypt, but some appear peculiar to Assyria. In many other respects, however, the identity of the two systems is complete. Non-phonetic signs are used as determinatives, precisely in the same manner, though not perhaps to the same extent, as in Egyptian, and the names of the gods are represented by signs, which appear in some cases to be arbitrary monograms, but which are more generally, either the dominant sound of the name, or its initial phonetic power¹, which is used for the same purpose in the Demotic alphabet of Egypt. There is also to be remarked the same poverty of the elemental alphabetical sounds; the same want of distinction between the hard and soft pronunciation of the consonants; the same mutation of the liquids and other phonetic powers not strictly homogeneous²; the same extensive employment of homophones. The whole system, indeed, of homophones is essentially Egyptian, and could only, I think, have arisen with a nation which made use of picture writing before it attempted alphabetical expression.

In some respects the Assyrian alphabet is even more difficult to be made out than the Egyptian. In the latter, the object depicted can almost always be recognized, and the Coptic name of the object will usually give, in its initial sound, the phonetic power of the hieroglyph; whereas in Assyrian, the machinery by which the power is evolved is altogether obscure—we neither know the object represented, nor if we did know it, should we be able to ascertain its Assyrian name—

bably being considered by the Assyrians and Babylonians to be phonetically identical with *bar*.

¹ For instance, the ordinary sign for *Bel* is a simple B, >||; | stands for *Sut*; >|||> for *Husi*. In many cases, however, the monograms seem to be arbitrary, as in >>> for *Nit*; >|||, >|||> or >||> for *Nebo*; < for *Hem*; <<< another sign for *Bel*; >||| for *Sut*, &c., &c. The phonetic rendering of proper names in Assyrian depends almost entirely on a full understanding of the Pantheon, and this is unfortunately the most difficult branch perhaps of the whole Cuneiform inquiry.

² I refer to the interchange of the *l* and *v*, exemplified in such characters as <||, <||, >>>||>, and also in >||> or >||>, <||> or <||>. Many other signs represent the *l*, and *d*, or *t*, indifferently, such as >|| or >||, >|| or >||, &c. There is also the greatest possible difficulty in distinguishing between the *k*, and the *d*, or *t*; and the gutturals and sibilants everywhere interchange.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

ASSYRIA AND BABYLONIA.

7

everything has to be subjected to the “*experimentum crucis*,” and although, in working out this tentative process, the reduced number of the Assyrian signs, the key of eighty proper names, and the unlimited facilities for comparison, tend essentially to lessen the labour, it may be doubted if these united aids are equivalent to the single advantage which Egyptologists enjoy of being able to apply the Coptic vocabulary to the elimination of the phonetic powers of the hieroglyphic signs.

With regard also to the employment of the Cuneiform characters, it is important to observe, that the Assyrian alphabet, with its many imperfections, its most inconvenient laxity, and its cumbrous array of homophones, continued, from the time when it was first organized upon an Egyptian model, up to the period, probably, of the reign of Cyrus the Great, to be the one sole type of writing employed by all the nations of Western Asia, from Syria to the heart of Persia: and, what is still more remarkable, the Assyrian alphabet was thus adopted without reference to the language, or even to the class of language, to which it was required to be applied. There is, thus, no doubt but that the alphabets of Assyria, of Armenia, of Babylonia, of Susiana, and of Elymais are, so far as essentials are concerned, one and the same; there are peculiarities of form, a limitation of usage, an affection for certain favourite characters, incidental to each of the localities; but unquestionably the alphabets are “*au fond*” identical, while the language of Armenia certainly, and the languages of Susiana and Elymais probably, are not of the same stock even as the dialects spoken in Assyria and Babylonia.

Having shown the means by which a knowledge has been obtained of the Assyrian alphabet, I now proceed to consider the language. The same process which led to the identification of the signs of the alphabet was afterwards applied to the language; that is, as duplicate names determined the value of the Assyrian characters, so did duplicate phrases give the meaning of the Babylonian vocables, and afford an insight into the grammatical structure of the tongue. The stately but sterile formula of Royal commemoration, to which are devoted all the ordinary trilingual tablets of Persia, were certainly anything but favourable to this reanimation of a lost language; but still they were not without their use. They furnished a basis of interpretation, which was afterwards improved and enlarged by a careful dissection of the Inscription which is found on the tomb of Darius at Nakhsh-i-Rustam¹, and by a minute analysis of the fragments which remain

¹ I take this opportunity of mentioning that I am indebted to the late Mr. Tasker for a very excellent copy of the Nakhsh-i-Rustam Babylonian Inscript.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

of the great Babylonian translation at Behistun. If the Behistun Inscription had been recovered in as perfect a state as the less celebrated record at Nakhsh-i-Rustam, all the essential difficulties of decipherment would have been at once overcome. There is so much variety, both of matter and of idiom, in the former document, that a complete and rigid translation of the Persian text in the Babylonian character and language would have furnished materials for a grammar and compendious vocabulary. Unfortunately, however, the left half, or perhaps a larger portion even, of the tablet is entirely destroyed, and we have thus the mere endings of the lines throughout the entire length of the Inscription; the fragments which in several of the most interesting passages are alone legible, being not only insufficient to resolve difficulties, but sometimes actually affording of themselves fresh enigmas for solution.

I will frankly confess, indeed, that after having mastered every Babylonian letter, and every Babylonian word, to which any clue existed in the trilingual tablets, either by direct evidence or by induction, I have been tempted, on more occasions than one, in striving to apply the key thus obtained to the interpretation of the Assyrian Inscriptions, to abandon the study altogether in utter despair of arriving at any satisfactory result. It would be affectation to pretend that, because I can ascertain the general purport of an inscription, or, because I can read and approximately render a plain historical record like that upon the Nineveh Obelisk, I am really a complete master of the ancient Assyrian language. It would be disingenuous to slur over the broad fact, that the science of Assyrian decipherment is yet in its infancy. Let it be remembered, that although fifty years have elapsed since the Rosetta Stone was first discovered, and its value was recognized as a partial key to the hieroglyphs, during which period many of the most powerful intellects of modern Europe have devoted themselves to the study of Egyptian; nevertheless, that study, as a distinct branch of philology, has hardly yet passed through its first preliminary stage of cultivation. How, then, can it be expected, that in studying Assyrian, with an alphabet scarcely less difficult, and with a language far more difficult than the Egyptian,—with no Plutarch to dissect the Pantheon and supply the names of the gods,—no Manetho or Eratosthenes to

tion, a copy, indeed, so good, that, with the exception of a few letters, I have been able to make out the entire legend, and have succeeded moreover in referring every word to its correspondent in the Persian original. Mr. Tasker, far more adventurous than Westergaard, descended by ropes from the summit of the cliff, and took his copy of the writing swinging in mid-air. He remained indeed for several hours in this perilous position during five successive days, in order to secure for his work the utmost available accuracy.

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Henry Creswicke Rawlinson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

classify the dynasties and furnish the means of identifying the kings,—how can it be supposed, that with all the difficulties that beset, and none of the facilities that assist Egyptologists, two or three individuals are to accomplish in a couple of years, more than all Europe has been able to effect in half a century? I have thought it necessary to make these observations, in order to put the Society on its guard against running away with an idea, that the philological branch of the Assyrian inquiry has been exhausted; and that nothing now remains but to read inscriptions and reap the fruits of our knowledge. A commencement has been made; the first outwork has been carried in a hitherto impregnable position—and that is all. I will now state exactly what we know of the language.

The Babylonian translations of the Persian text in the trilingual tablets, including, of course, the long Inscription at Nakhsh-i-Rustam and the fragments from Behistun¹, have furnished a list of about two hundred Babylonian words, of which we know the sound approximately, and the meaning certainly. These words are almost all found either in their full integrity, or subjected to some slight modification, in Assyrian, and we can usually, by their means, arrive at a pretty correct notion of the general purport of the phrase in which they occur. The difficult, and at the same time the essential part of the study of Assyrian, consists in thus discovering the unknown from the known, in laying bare the anatomy of the Assyrian sentences, and, guided by grammatical indications, by a few Babylonian landmarks, and especially by the context, in tracing out, sometimes through Semitic analogies, but more frequently through an extensive comparison of similar or cognate phrases, the meaning of words which are otherwise strange to us. It is in this particular branch of the study, which I have prosecuted with great diligence and with all available care, that I think I have made good progress, having added about two hundred meanings certainly, and one hundred more probably, to the vocabulary already obtained through the Babylonian translations. I estimate the number of words which occur in the Babylonian and Assyrian Inscriptions at about five thousand, and I do not pretend to be acquainted with more than a tenth part of that number; but it must be remembered, that the five hundred known

¹ Many of the standard expressions at Behistun, such as “the rebels having assembled their forces came against me offering battle; I fought with them and defeated them, &c., &c.,” prove to have been adopted almost verbatim from the Assyrian annals. It was, indeed, the discovery of known passages of this sort in the Obelisk Inscription, that first gave me an insight into the general purport of the legend.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

words constitute all the most important terms in the language, and are in fact, sufficient for the interpretation of the historical Inscriptions, and for the general recognition of the object of every record, be it an invocation or dedication, or, as it more frequently happens, be it intended as a mere commemorative legend.

The next subject to be considered, is the actual language of the Assyrian and Babylonian Inscriptions, a language which is certainly neither Hebrew, nor Chaldee, nor Syriac, nor any of the known cognate dialects, but which, nevertheless, presents so many points of analogy with those dialects, both in grammatical structure and in its elemental words, that it may, I think, be determinately classed among the Semitic family. It will be observed, that I here include the languages of Assyria and Babylonia in a common category. They can hardly be termed identical, inasmuch as each dialect affects the employment of certain specific verbal roots, and certain particular nouns and adjectives; but they are at any rate sufficiently alike in their internal organization to render illustrations drawn from the Inscriptions of Babylon applicable to those of Assyria, in so far as such illustrations may be of philological value. Although, therefore, the examples which I am about to cite are chiefly taken from the Babylonian translations at Behistun, the Semitic affinities which they indicate may be understood to be all more or less shared by the Assyrian.

One of the peculiarities of Babylonian, and which must be carefully borne in mind in tracing etymologies, is, that the powers of *l* and *v*, when occurring as the complement of a syllable, and sometimes even as initial articulations, are almost undistinguishable; this interchange being the same that led the Phœnicians to write *Malik* and *Mók* indifferently¹, that softened the Hebrew גִּלְךָ, "to go," into גִּוְךָ in Chaldee; that has, in fact, induced the French universally to substitute *u* for the silent *l* of other languages, as in "*autre*" for *alter*, "*faux*" for *falsus*, "*chaud*" for *calidus*, &c., &c.

There is thus a definite article in Babylonian, frequently, but by no means invariably employed, which we may read *hav*; this article standing halfway, as I think, between the Berber *va* and the Coptic Π on the one side, and the Hebrew *hal* and Arabic *Al* on the other².

¹ See Gesen. Monum. Phœnic., vol. I., p. 431.

² The true, or at any rate the primitive pronunciation of the Bab. article, which is also used as a demonstrative pronoun and adverb, may perhaps be *halv* or *harv*. Compare the Chaldee אַלְךָ or אַרְךָ, and see Gesenius's remarks on this word in page 84 of his Lexicon. Some of the forms of the article are,