

**OLD AKKADIAN INSCRIPTIONS IN
CHICAGO NATURAL HISTORY
MUSEUM; TEXTS OF LEGAL AND
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TEXTS OF LEGAL AND BUSINESS INTEREST

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Preface

It is an old and well-known story that not alone the ancient tells of the Near East, but also our modern museums are fertile soil for the would-be discoverer of antiquities. Dug up from their ancient resting place and shipped along with a host of other objects to a museum, valuable items are sometimes stored away and forgotten for years until a lucky stroke of fortune brings them to light again.

The rediscovery of the now famous Babylonian Chronicle telling of the fall of Nineveh is a case in point. Excavated and brought to the British Museum in London toward the end of the last century, it lay hidden and unrecognized for years before it was finally brought out of its oblivion and published in 1923. Immediately it became evident that this long-lost document was of fundamental importance for the correct understanding of the historical events in the last days of the Assyrian Empire.

A similar discovery, though not of such epoch-making proportions, has been made in Chicago Natural History Museum. Shortly after the first World War the late Lieutenant Colonel J. H. Patterson, D.S.O., British Army of Occupation in Iraq, purchased a collection of cuneiform tablets from an Arab at Babylon. In 1925 he presented these tablets to the Museum. There they remained in oblivion until they were found in the latter half of 1936 by Mr. Richard A. Martin, at that time Curator of Near Eastern Archaeology, now Curator of the Department of the N. W. Harris Public School Extension, who then requested me to investigate the collection and ascertain its importance.

From the very first there has never been any question about the importance of the collection. The tablets are inscribed in a dialect of the Old Akkadian language and date back over four thousand years, almost to the very beginning of written history in Mesopotamia. Their importance is immediately apparent from several points of view.

In the first place, the texts provide a most important source of material for the study of the oldest Akkadian dialect. At the same time they make possible the clarification of many problems con-

nected with the reconstruction of Proto-Semitic. The texts likewise greatly further our understanding of the development of social institutions in the Near East, for their subject matter is largely legal and administrative in nature. Containing, as they do, many words attesting to the existence of certain tools and implements used in industry and agriculture, the texts shed light on these activities of the ancient Akkadians as well. And, finally, the personal names mentioned in the texts help in the reconstruction of the ethnic background of the area in which the tablets originated.

Contrary to the normal procedure in text publications of this sort, the tablets are here presented in the form of photographs rather than in autographed copies. Since Old Akkadian texts are usually written in a clear, legible script, it is hoped that this will inflict no hardship upon the reader. The plates show the tablets in their actual size.

Elsewhere in this monograph (pp. 169ff.) it is suggested that the tablets of the Museum ultimately originated in the region of the Diyala River, east of the Tigris. Since almost no tablets of the Old Akkadian period from this region have as yet been made public, it is more than fortunate that I have had access to materials from the Diyala region in the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. They have been most useful for comparison with the Museum tablets. To Professor John A. Wilson, the past Director of the Oriental Institute, I owe a debt of gratitude for his kind permission to use this material in the present monograph.

To Colonel Clifford C. Gregg, the Director of Chicago Natural History Museum, I wish to express my thanks and gratitude for giving me the opportunity to study the collection and for approving its publication by the Museum press. Both Dr. Paul S. Martin, Chief Curator of Anthropology in the Museum, and Mr. Richard Martin have been helpful in technical matters pertaining to the publication of this study. Professors Frederick W. Geers and Thorkild Jacobsen of the Oriental Institute were kind enough to read the manuscript and offer valuable suggestions. To each of these scholars I express my sincere appreciation of their kind help.

The manuscript of the work here presented had been completed in 1941, when several conditions, all indirectly evolving from our entry into the Second World War, interrupted its publication. In the few years after the war my preoccupations with the administration of the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary project and with the publication of the Oriental Institute Diyala tablets (issued in the mean-

time in my *Sargonic Texts from the Diyala Region* (Chicago, 1952) caused a further delay in bringing the Museum project to a speedy and successful conclusion. This delay was rather fortunate in one respect, however. A thorough study of the Oriental Institute materials enabled me to solve a number of difficult problems in the Museum texts, which were not clear to me before.

December, 1954

I. J. GELB

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