Sumérien – Articles (En cours d'édition)

Article	Titre
A1	The Cyrus Cylinder
A2	The Kurkh Monolith and Black Obelisk
A3	The Birth of Writing
A4	Translating Cuneiform with AI
A5	Linear Elamite Deciphered
A6	A New Light for the World's Oldest Unknown Script
A7	Ancient DNA from a Cuneiform Brick
A8	The Rebirth of Archaeology in Iraq
A9	Slowly, Iraqi Antiquities Begin to Return
A10	The Ten Lost Tribes
A11	10 Things to Know About the Assyrian Empire
A12	The Decline of the Neo-Assyrian Empire
A13	Back to Ugarit
A14	
A15	
A16	
A17	
A18	
A19	
A20	
A21	
A22	
A23	
A24	

The Cyrus Cylinder

https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-near-eastern-world/the-cyrus-cylinder/

A Persian edict and the return of the Judean exiles

The Cyrus Cylinder on display at the British Museum.

The Cyrus Cylinder is one of the best-known surviving texts from the Achaemenid Persian Empire (c. 550–332 BCE), due almost entirely to its proposed connection to the return of the Judean exiles and the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple as recorded in the Book of Ezra. However, beyond its biblical connection, the Cyrus Cylinder is a rather standard inscription, closely resembling many that came before it. So, what is the Cyrus Cylinder and how does it relate to the history and world of the Bible?

This is the second part of an exclusive Bible History Daily series on historical texts that are important for understanding the history and world of the Bible.

What is the Cyrus Cylinder?

The Cyrus Cylinder is a small barrel-shaped artifact of baked clay. It is inscribed with a text that records the acts of the Persian king Cyrus the Great (r. 559–530 BCE), who conquered the Babylonian Empire and–according to the Hebrew Bible–was directly responsible for the return of the Judean exiles from Babylonia. Across multiple centuries and cultures, Cyrus was remembered in a remarkably favorable light compared to other powerful conquerors. The later Greek historians Herodotus (*The Histories*) and Xenophon (*The Education of Cyrus*) present him as an ideal ruler and paragon of moral virtue. The Book of Isaiah (45:1) even refers to Cyrus as the Lord's anointed one, making him the only figure in the Hebrew Bible who is declared "YHWH's messiah" without being an anointed king of Judah.

Uncovered during excavations in Babylon in 1879, the incompletely preserved cylinder contains 45 lines of cuneiform text written in the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian. The cylinder was presumably commissioned by Cyrus at the time of his rebuilding of Babylon, following his conquest of the region. It begins with a historical prologue, telling about the evils of the previous Babylonian king, Nabonidus (r. 556–539 BCE). According to the text, in response to the impious actions of Nabonidus, the Babylonian god Marduk summoned Cyrus to overthrow Nabonidus and return order to Babylon by rebuilding temples and returning cultic images and exiles to their homes.

Stele of Nabonidus, the last king of Babylon.

From the very beginning, this text has remarkable similarities to the biblical account found in Ezra (1:1-4), where it is the Hebrew god YHWH, not Marduk, who stirs up the heart of Cyrus to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem and return the exiles to Judah. However, the connection between the Cyrus Cylinder and biblical history is not nearly as straightforward and certain as first glance suggests. Numerous scholars have argued against any direct connection between the cylinder and the biblical narrative.

While the cylinder does indeed discuss the rebuilding of cultic centers and the return of exiles, it never speaks of Jerusalem and the Judeans. Instead, the Cyrus Cylinder focuses specifically on Babylonia. It is the Babylonian cult centers and Babylonian deports that are reported being restored. Thus, while this inscription closely reflects the story of Ezra, it does not report the same events.[1] Yet even if the Cyrus Cylinder and Ezra are not referring to the same event, is it possible that they reflect a larger Persian policy, one that led to both events? Could the Cyrus Cylinder simply be the Babylonian version of the edict of the king?

Connecting the Cyrus Cylinder and Biblical history

There are two main difficulties with seeing the Cyrus Cylinder as part of a larger Persian policy, and thereby connecting it to the narrative in Ezra. First, while the inscription is a beautiful object, it was never intended for reading. Instead, the cylinder is a foundation inscription—a text buried during the construction or remodeling of a building. As such, it was meant to be read by the gods alone. This was a common practice in the ancient Near East and it brings up the second difficulty. The contents of the Cyrus Cylinder are not remarkably different from similar foundation inscriptions written by earlier Babylonian and Assyrian kings. Instead, Cyrus merely appears to be continuing a tradition of overly grandiose claims that may or may not have ever come to pass.[1] Esarhaddon famously had similar inscriptions written regarding his reconstruction of Babylon a century earlier but died before ever carrying out what he had asserted. Because of these difficulties, several scholars have argued that the cylinder bears little, if any, relevance on a broader Persian policy. However, recent discoveries may suggest otherwise.

Until recently, it was believed that the Cyrus Cylinder was a one-off inscription, with no duplicates ever discovered. However, in 2009 and 2010, two small fragments of text were identified in the British Museum that duplicate the cylinder. These fragments did not come from a cylinder but from a large cuneiform tablet, which must have carried the same text as the Cyrus Cylinder.

Tomb of Cyrus the Great.

According to Irving Finkel, famed Assyriologist and curator at the British Museum, the recently identified tablet likely originated from an official scribal office where many copies were made and sent throughout the various regions of the empire. “Even a cursory glance at the text of the Cylinder shows that the inscription falls into discrete sections, and it is not hard to imagine that there might have been a core account of the conquest of Babylon and the takeover of power which could have extra passages added or adapted to local interest in the creation of other such accounts,” wrote Finkel in his book on the cylinder.[2] It is then certainly possible that the Cyrus Cylinder and the narrative in Ezra both reflect official state proclamations from the Persian administration soon after its conquest of a region.

Moreover, it would not be surprising if the Persian Empire had followed a policy, shared by other ancient empires, of giving privileged positions to cities in strategically important locations or exempting them from certain taxes, to ensure that these cities remained loyal to the empire.[1] Judah in this period was likely in just such a situation, given its closeness to the Egyptian state as well as the troublesome Arabian tribes, both of which posed a threat to Persian control in the region. A possible reference to this policy can be found in Ezra (4:13), where it mentions that once the walls were completed, Jerusalem would no longer need to pay taxes.

Although the Cyrus Cylinder cannot be directly connected to the biblical narrative, it is certainly possible–if not probable–that it does reflect the same situation as the Bible does: a consistent and pointed propagandistic attempt by the Persian Empire to establish themselves as a conquering savior, operating under the command and anointing of the local pantheon.

Notes

1: Amélie Kuhrt, “The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25 (1983), pp. 83–97.

2: Irving Finkel, *The Cyrus Cylinder: the Great Persian Edict from Babylon* (London: Tauris, 2012).

The Kurkh Monolith and Black Obelisk

https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-near-eastern-world/kurkh-monolith-black-obelisk/

References to Ancient Israel in Assyrian Texts

The Kurkh Monolith of Shalmaneser III.

When discussing historical references to ancient Israel outside of the Bible, many note the famous Tel Dan Inscription or the Mesha Stele, but there are two important Assyrian texts that are often forgotten: the Kurkh Monolith and the Black Obelisk.[1] These inscriptions contain not only two of the oldest mentions of ancient Israel, but also describe events not mentioned in the Bible.

The Kurkh Monolith

The Kurkh Monolith, uncovered at Tell Kurkh in Syria in the 19th century, is one of the earliest mentions of ancient Israel, predating both the Tel Dan Inscription and the Mesha Stele by several decades. The monolith (technically a stela) was erected by Shalmaneser III, king of Assyria, to commemorate his military campaign to the west in 853 BCE. Although important for reconstructing Shalmaneser's reign, the stela is also interesting for its mention of Ahab, king of Israel (r. 871–852 BCE).

The stela describes the events of Shalmaneser's campaign against several southwest Syrian kingdoms. During the campaign, the Assyrian king was met by a coalition of kings, including Ahab of Israel. This was the first instance of any real resistance against the encroaching Assyrian threat that would eventually conquer all of Syria and the Levant, save for the Kingdom of Judah.

As with other Assyrian stelae, the Kurkh Monolith provides significant details about the conflict, listing Ahab along with ten other kings that took part in the alliance, and the number of troops each brought to the battle.

Ahab is mentioned third among the list of allied kings, showing Israel was one of the more powerful members of the alliance. The stela says that Ahab was able to bring 2,000 chariots to the battle. This would be an astonishingly large number, as many as Assyria itself, and particularly surprising for a hilly kingdom like Israel that could not have easily used chariots in its own territory. Thus many scholars have suggested that the number of chariots, as well as the total number of troops involved, were heavily inflated.[2] This was a common propagandistic practice within the ancient Near East, as it would have presented the victor as much stronger than they actually were.

Interestingly, this military conflict between Shalmaneser and Ahab goes completely unmentioned in the Hebrew Bible, and it is not until the campaigns of Tiglath-Pileser III (biblical Pul), a century after the reign of Ahab, that the Assyrian army, by then on the doorstop of Israel's kingdom, is mentioned as a serious threat (2 Kings 15:17).

Other intriguing aspects of this inscription include the specific reference to Ahab as the king of Israel (called *Sir'al* in Akkadian). While many other texts designate kingdoms by the name of their founders—such as "House of David" in the Tel Dan Inscription (and possibly the Mesha Stele) or "House of Omri" in numerous other Assyrian inscriptions—this text provides the formal name of the kingdom, Israel. Another interesting aspect of the inscription is the kings mentioned alongside Ahab. These include Adad-idri of Damascus (likely biblical Hadadezer) as well as Gindibu the Arab, the earliest historical reference to the ancient Arabs.

The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III.

The Black Obelisk

Like the Kurkh Monolith, the Black Obelisk is a victory record of Shalmaneser III. However, what makes this obelisk stand out is its possible artistic depiction of Jehu, the king of Israel (r. 841–814 BCE). Dated to 826 BCE, a few decades after the Kurkh Monolith, the stela includes details of several of Shalmaneser's earlier campaigns, including a campaign in 838 BCE in which he fought against yet another alliance of Syrian and Levantine kingdoms.

Whereas the alliance had been able to repel Shalmaneser in his earlier campaigns, by this point the Assyrian king had pushed farther into Syria and succeeded in taking several cities of Hazael of Damascus, the same king that wrote the Tel Dan Inscription. Following this blow, the Phoenician city-states of Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos paid off the Assyrian king with tribute. So too did Jehu, who sent Shalmaneser silver, gold, tin, and even a royal scepter to symbolize Assyria's dominance over the Kingdom of Israel.

Like the earlier conflict between Ahab and Shalmaneser, the submission of Jehu to Assyria is also not mentioned in the Bible, which instead focuses on matters closer to home, such as the ongoing conflict between Israel and its erstwhile ally, Damascus (2 Kings 8:25–29).

Perhaps the most discussed feature of the Black Obelisk is the proposed picture of Jehu himself. Carved on each side of the Black Obelisk are images of the conquered kings who paid tribute to Shalmaneser. Next to each ruler is found a small inscription with the name of the king giving tribute; one's name is Jehu of Israel. Despite this attribution, however, it is unlikely that the figure is an actual depiction of Jehu; rather, it is more likely a stock image of a king bowing in submission to Shalmaneser.

Possible depiction of King Jehu before Shalmaneser III.

Unlike the Kurkh Monolith, the Black Obelisk refers to Jehu as the "Son of Omri." This is perplexing at first, as the Bible tells us that Jehu was indeed not a "son of Omri" but rather came to the throne through a coup, thus indicating that he was not even part of the same dynasty (2 Kings 9–10). For the Assyrians, however, how Jehu came to the throne was likely less important than the fact that he was the ruler of the kingdom founded by Omri. It is also possible that Jehu actually was a descendant of Omri, but from a separate branch of the family.

Israel in Later Assyrian Texts

Several other Akkadian texts recording the victories of Assyrian kings mention the Kingdom of Israel between the time of Shalmaneser and the campaigns of Tiglath-Pileser III. Indeed, several other texts of Shalmaneser III mention Israel, its kings, and topics related to them. One text from Assur even mentions Hazael, "son of none," coming to the throne after Hadadezer, a possible reference to his usurpation as mentioned in 2 Kings 8:7–15.

Texts from the reign of Adad-Nerari III continue to mention the alliance between Damascus and Israel and its attempts to defend the region against Assyria. In this regard, the Tell al-Rimah Stele is notable for mentioning King Joash of Samaria. This is the first time the term Samaria is used in Akkadian to refer to the Kingdom of Israel. Additionally, it is possible that Adad-Nerari is the "deliverer" mentioned in 2 Kings 13:5, who saved Israel from Aram, shortly before the reign of Joash.

While these texts might not receive the same headlines as the Tel Dan Inscription or the Mesha Stele, the information they provide is exceptionally important for understanding the interactions of Israel, Judah, and Damascus as well as their eventual conquest or submission to Assyria.

Notes:

1: For more on these inscriptions and others see: Mordechai Cogen, *The Raging Torrent*, 2 ed, (Jerusalem: Carta, 2015)
2: Nadav Na'aman, "Two Notes on the Monolith Inscription of Shalmaneser III from Kurkh," *Tel Aviv* 3.3 (1976), pp. 89–106.

The Birth of Writing

https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-near-eastern-world/birth-of-writing/

Proto-cuneiform tablet discovered in southern Iraq

Proto-Cuneiform tablet from Tell Zurghul.

Undoubtedly, writing is one of humanity's most significant inventions, emerging in the ancient Near East, in both Mesopotamia and Egypt, nearly simultaneously. In Mesopotamia, the earliest evidence of what can definitively be called writing—recorded in the cuneiform script—shows up in the ancient city of Uruk at the end of the fourth millennium BCE. However, a new discovery at Tell Zurghul, 50 miles east of Uruk in southern Iraq, provides new evidence of the spread of cuneiform at the very dawn of writing.

Writing Before Writing

Excavations at Tell Zurghul (ancient Ningin) by Sapienza University of Rome uncovered a small clay tablet inscribed in proto-cuneiform. Proto-cuneiform was the precursor to the later cuneiform script and was in use in the region of Uruk for a few hundred years before the evolution of cuneiform. Like other proto-scripts, proto-cuneiform was not quite a full writing system, as it could only convey a limited range of information, such as quantities of goods and commodities. Today, this would be much the same as making a shopping list using only the food emojis on your phone.

What makes this discovery particularly important, however, is that it is one of very few such tablets found outside the Uruk region and the first to be discovered in the region of Lagash. Thus, the tablet provides new evidence for the spread of proto-cuneiform and its early use as a record-keeping system. According to a Sapienza University press release, the tablet records the distribution of large quantities of fish. The tablet's scribe also notes 500 wicker baskets, which would have been used to transport the fish. Excavations at the site have discovered numerous fish bones along with bitumen seals that bear wicker impressions, showing that such baskets were a common element of the city's ancient economy.

Translating Cuneiform with AI

https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-near-eastern-world/translating-cuneiform-ai/

Potentials and challenges in studying ancient texts

Translating Cuneiform: Brick inscription of Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 605-562 BCE).

Assyriologists spend their entire careers translating cuneiform texts, yet today, hundreds of thousands of inscriptions written in the languages of this ancient script—the earliest in the world—remain untranslated. With the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), that may not be a problem for much longer. In the journal *PNAS Nexus*, researchers at Tel Aviv University and Ariel University present a new program capable of automatically translating cuneiform texts into English.

Cuneiform in the Time of AI

While applications like Google Translate make translating modern languages seamless, translating ancient languages is far more complex. Since most translation programs are designed around the Latin script, researchers working to translate ancient languages need to start from scratch and create new tools based around their target language.

As such, the authors of the study had to build a new program capable of translating Akkadian, one of the most prevalent languages to use cuneiform, into English. The program, which takes either Unicode or transliterated versions of the cuneiform text, compares the inscription against a training set of over 8,000 texts already translated by experts. “This will transform the way we produce editions and sources,” Shai Gordin, senior lecturer in Assyriology and Digital Humanities at Ariel University and co-lead on the project, told *Bible History Daily*.

3D model of a cuneiform inscription from the Ur III period (c. 2100-2004 BCE).

Assyriologists spend a great deal of time reading and translating the cuneiform signs used to write Akkadian, Sumerian, and other ancient Near Eastern languages. While proper translation requires an intimate knowledge of the original language, it also requires a great deal of cultural knowledge regarding the meaning of phrases, idioms, and metaphors. Although auto-translating cuneiform will not replace expert Assyriologists anytime soon, it does have the potential to drastically speed up their work by providing preliminary textual readings. This is incredibly important given the hundreds of thousands of cuneiform documents that have been excavated but not translated.

“It will make more things accessible for students who want to read translations of texts, and that, just for itself, democratizes access to really opaque and obscure materials,” said Gordin. “Maybe it will create an interest in even a few more people to dig into these sources for their own, or researchers interested in comparative studies.”

“We hope that at some point AI can assist Assyriologists as well as non-Assyriologists in understanding cuneiform texts,” added Luis Saenz, a Ph.D. student at the University of Heidelberg and a co-author of the article. “AI offers the possibility for non-Assyriologists to understand to some extent the content of the tablet.”

Akkadian, the *lingua franca* of the ancient Near East for roughly 2,000 years during the second and first millennia BCE, is one of the best-attested languages in antiquity and was in use until the first century CE. Recording the history, culture, and religion of large empires like the Assyrians and Babylonians, Akkadian texts provide one of the largest sources of knowledge of the ancient world available to scholars today. The importance of the language is even evident in the Amarna Letters, which record the cuneiform correspondence between the Egyptian pharaoh and Canaanite kings, none of whom spoke Akkadian as their primary language.

Although Akkadian was one of the primary languages to use cuneiform, other ancient Near Eastern Languages used the script as well, including Sumerian, Elamite, Hittite, Luwian, Hurrian, Amorite, and Ugaritic. Likely developed for the Sumerian language, cuneiform was in use from at least the mid-third millennium into the common era. While the program developed by the researchers is primarily intended to translate Akkadian texts, it is hoped that new tools will be developed that will allow the program to translate other cuneiform languages as well. According to Saenz, another addition the team hopes to add is a web-based platform for a more user-friendly translator. Gordin points to the potential of using this as a tool for the creation of new textual editions of texts in collaboration with other teams.

While the program is still in its early stages, Gordin stresses, “What we are trying to do is to create an infrastructure and tools for others to more easily get into it and produce new materials and research that builds on our work.”

Currently, the pioneering program is only capable of working with Unicode (a digitized script used to represent non-Latin-based scripts and signs) or transliterations (Latin script conversions of the cuneiform). However, other programs are currently in existence or development that can take hand copies of texts or even 3D models and convert them into Unicode, which can then be used for auto-translating.

Many of these programs have been developed by individual research teams, but more and more collaboration is occurring in digital Assyriology. This is allowing previously disparate projects to work together. One such collaborative effort is the Digital Ancient Near Eastern Studies Network (DANES), which brings together Assyriologists and computer scientists from Israel, Europe, and the United States. Groups like DANES allow researchers to pool resources to solve issues like translating cuneiform.

Troublesome Translating

Translating cuneiform comes with some unique challenges, including the fragmentary nature of many texts. One of the biggest difficulties researchers face, however, is the logo-phonetic nature of the cuneiform script. Within the logo-phonetic system, signs can serve multiple functions as either a phoneme (a distinct unit of sound), determinative (a marker of type), or logogram (a symbol intended to represent a whole word). As such, individual signs can be read in many ways. The cuneiform sign □ “UD,” for example, can be read in over 20 different ways. Furthermore, of the nearly 1,000

cuneiform signs, many share phonetic readings, with roughly a dozen signs having, for example, the phonetic value “bu” alone. Because of this, many cuneiform signs can only be understood in relation to the signs that come before or after them.

Another issue in translating cuneiform is that all of the languages that used t are considered “low resource” languages, meaning that only a limited amount of data is available for training the AI system. While hundreds of thousands of cuneiform documents are known, many of them have never been translated and many of those that have been translated have never been digitized, making them largely unavailable to researchers.

Linear Elamite Deciphered

https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-near-eastern-world/linear_elamite_deciphered/

Ancient Iranian script finally unlocked

Perforated stone containing a Linear Elamite text. Jean-Vincent Scheil (1858-1940),

Despite the progress made deciphering ancient scripts over the past two centuries, a few remain tantalizingly out of reach, including the ancient Iranian script, Linear Elamite. Or is it? According to an article in the journal *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie*, this 4,000-year-old script, which recorded the language of Elam, has finally been almost completely deciphered. While a few questions remain, this is a massive step in understanding the language of the powerful Elamite kingdom that would eventually become the Persian Empire.

The Journey to Deciphering an Ancient Script

Like the Indus Valley script, the Minoan Linear-A script, and a few others, Linear Elamite has puzzled scholars since it was first discovered in excavations at the city of Susa (biblical Shushan) in 1903. A likely descendent of Proto-Elamite, another still undeciphered script, Linear Elamite was the main script of the Elamite language in southern Iran from 2300 until 1880 B.C.E., when it was replaced by Mesopotamian cuneiform.

Map of Elam and Mesopotamia. Elamite cities marked with stars.

The Rosetta stone, containing an inscription in hieroglyphs, Demotic, and Greek.

Many ancient scripts have been deciphered using artifacts that feature both the unknown script and at least one known script which records the same message as the unknown. This was the case for Egyptian hieroglyphs, which were unlocked by the famous Rosetta Stone that contained the same text written in hieroglyphs, Demotic, and Greek. The decipherment of Linear Elamite, however, was a far more complex process. Although some artifacts contain both Linear Elamite and cuneiform, the two scripts never seem to translate each other. Such occurrences did allow a handful of signs to be deciphered, but it was a far cry from the smoking gun of the Rosetta Stone.

Recognizing these limitations, a team of scholars decided to take a different path. The team recognized that a group of silver beakers with Elamite inscriptions could be related to a second group of beakers that contained inscriptions written in Mesopotamian cuneiform. Although the texts are not in themselves identical, the extremely standardized nature of these inscriptions allowed the team to consider these objects much like the Rosetta Stone. With these texts, the team was able to identify numerous personal, geographic, and divine names in the Linear Elamite inscriptions, as well as Elamite phrases, clauses, and even sentences known from cuneiform texts. Working out from there, they succeeded in slowly unlocking the script sign by sign.

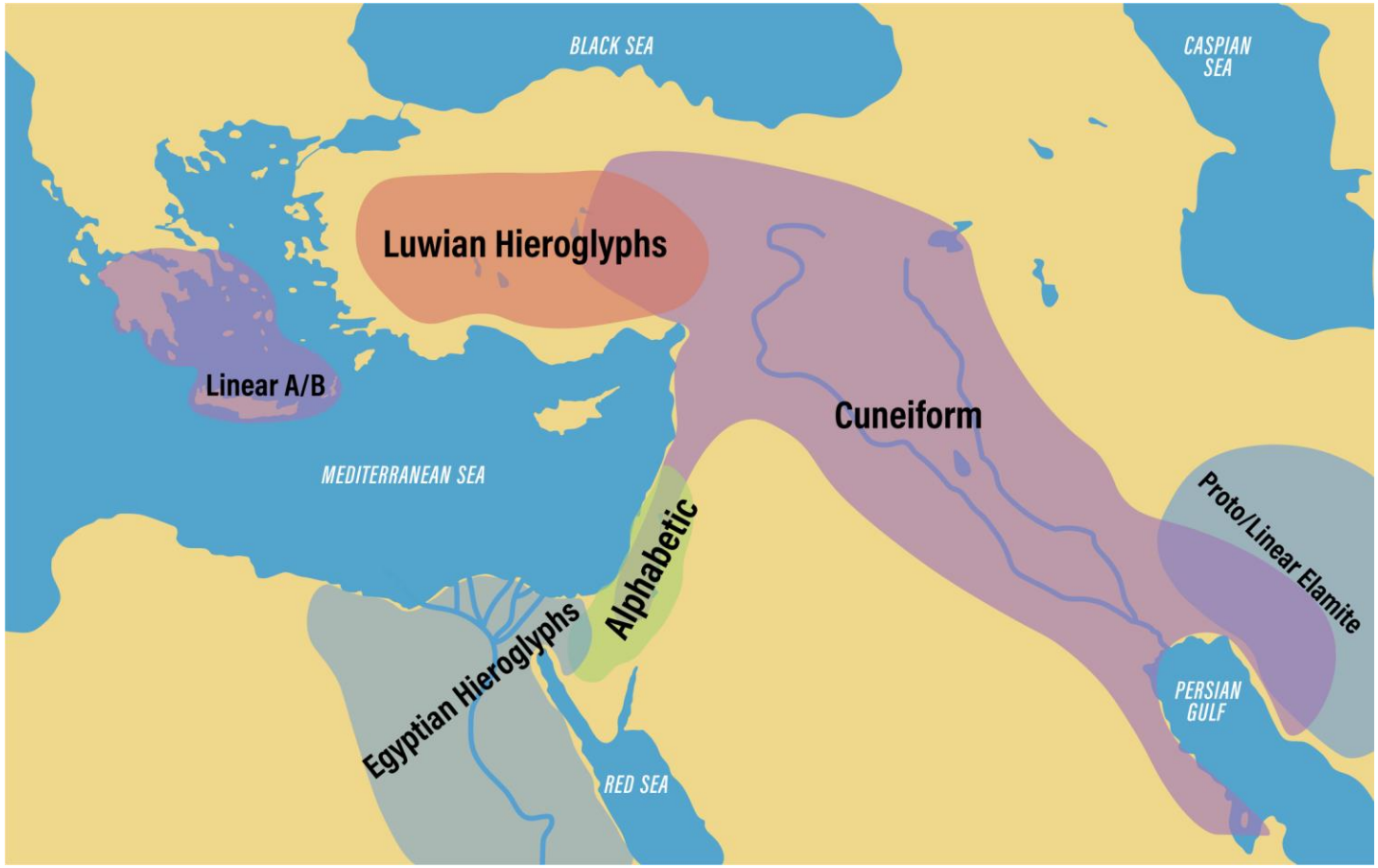
Bilingual inscription of King Kutik-Inshushinak in Linear Elamite and Akkadian. Jean-Vincent Scheil (1858-1940),

Through their breakthrough, the team identified and deciphered 72 different signs. While this does not account for all signs present in the Linear Elamite inscriptions, the remaining undeciphered signs are fairly rare. According to the team, it is possible that several of the undeciphered signs may be no more than graphic variants of already deciphered signs.

As further excavations in Iran are carried out, the team hopes that additional Linear Elamite inscriptions will be discovered that can unlock the remaining signs. For now, however, over 95 percent of sign occurrences are represented in the team's list of deciphered signs. Several scholars not associated with the research told the *Smithsonian Magazine* that they were quite convinced by the decipherment, even if some details are still being ironed out.

The Nature and History of Linear Elamite

Before this breakthrough, very little was known about Elamite scripts, and the language itself is still poorly understood. Now, however, it can be determined that Linear Elamite was quite distinct from the scripts of other cultures at the time, such as cuneiform and hieroglyphs. While other scripts utilized logographic or logo-syllabic scripts, Linear Elamite was an alpha-syllabary. As such, each sign represented a specific phonetic value. Unlike alphabetic scripts, however, these values typically included both a consonant and vowel sound (such as “ka,” “bi,” or “mu”), although some signs could represent a consonant or vowel alone. This system allowed for a significantly smaller number of signs than logographic or logo-syllabic systems. According to the team, Linear Elamite likely only had a little over 100 signs, while cuneiform had over 600. Meanwhile, most alphabetic systems, which first appeared in the Levant in the second millennium B.C.E., have between 20 and 30 signs.



General map of the origins of various Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean scripts.

The Elamite language was the lingua franca of the Elamite kingdom, eventually falling out of use towards the end of the first millennium B.C.E. when it was replaced by Persian. A language isolate, there are no known languages related to Elamite, although several hypotheses have attempted to connect it to either the Dravidian, Afro-Asiatic, or Caucasian language groups.

Proto-Elamite clay tablet. Louvre Museum, CC BY 3.0,

The earliest attestation of writing in Iran is the still undeciphered Proto-Elamite script, which was first written at the end of the fourth millennium B.C.E., making it one of the oldest scripts in the world, alongside Sumerian cuneiform and the undeciphered Indus Valley script. The Proto-Elamite script went out of use around 2900 B.C.E., and it was not until around 2300, with Linear-Elamite, that an indigenous script is once again documented in ancient Iran. Although it is not certain that Linear-Elamite was a descendant of Proto-Elamite, the team that deciphered Linear Elamite is quite confident that it is. They hope that their recent work will eventually lead to the key that will unlock Proto-Elamite as well.

The team of scholars included François Desset, Kambiz Tabibzadeh, Matthieu Kervran, Gian Pietro Basello, and Gianni Marchesi

Editor's note: This article was lightly modified after discussions with the original scholars.

A New Light for the World's Oldest Unknown Script

https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-artifacts/inscriptions/a-new-light-for-the-worlds-oldest-unknown-script/

Despite the existence of a corpus of some 1,600 texts, scholars have had a difficult time deciphering Early Bronze Age proto-Elamite documents. These texts, written in southwestern Iran between 3,200 and 2,900 B.C.E., stand out as one of the world's earliest corpora and also one of the most difficult to translate. Researchers from the University of Oxford and the University of Southampton are examining this ancient script in a new light—literally—by using a Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) system, a new technology that illuminates every detail inscribed on the clay tablets.

Researchers examined roughly 1,100 proto-Elamite tablets on loan from the Louvre under the 76 lights in the RTI system's dome. Separate photos were taken with each light individually before being processed together, allowing researchers to examine each tablet in every possible light, exposing never-before-seen subtleties. Researchers are digitizing the documents and putting them online for discussion, academic crowd-sourcing and cloud-based preservation.

This Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) system at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford takes photographs of the tablets in 76 different light settings.

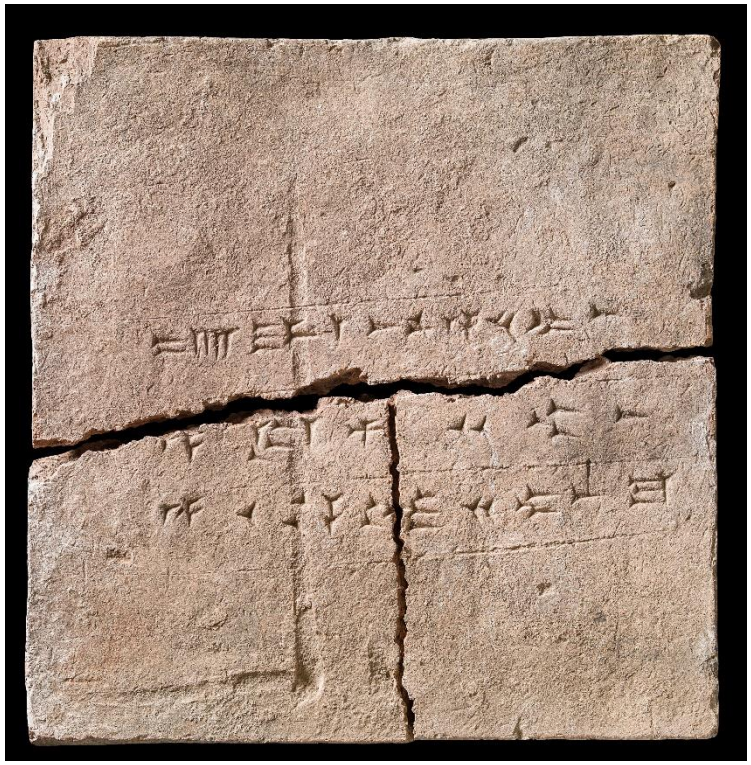
One of the many proto-Elamite documents scanned and made available to the public through the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative website.

The vast majority of the proto-Elamite texts come from the capital at Susa (Biblical Shushan), a city that played a major role proto-Elamite, Elamite, Mesopotamian, Persian and Parthian history over the course of several millennia. Shushan is well known from the Hebrew Bible; Esther becomes a queen there before saving the Jews, and Nehemiah and Daniel both reside there during the Babylonian exile. The Book of Jubilees (8:21 & 9:2) connects Susa to the earlier Elamite population, who are mentioned in earlier Biblical narratives. According to the Bible, the Elamites are descendants of Elam, one of the sons of Shem and grandson of Noah.

While the Tower of Babel narrative presents a Biblical tradition for the origins of the Elamite language and people, the uncertain connection between the Elamites and their proto-Elamite predecessors has proved a challenge for scholars. The script includes some common elements with early Mesopotamian writing, but a lack of bilingual texts and a great deal of scribal deviations have hampered the researchers' ability to discover linguistic patterns. The language appears to use both symbolic and phonetic combinations, but the poor scribal tradition and the uncertain relationship with neighboring or later Elamite languages has challenged linguists for decades. However, with the development of RTI technologies and a new universal access made available through digitization, researchers are confident that they have reached the breakthrough point.

Ancient DNA from a Cuneiform Brick

https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-near-eastern-world/ancient-dna-from-a-cuneiform-brick/



An Akkadian brick inscription containing ancient DNA. “The property of the palace of Ashurnasirpal, king of Assyria.

A group of researchers has successfully extracted DNA from an ancient cuneiform brick for the first time, identifying over thirty species of plants present in the brick’s clay. This project—published in the journal *Scientific Reports*—provides fascinating insight into the natural environment at the time and place the brick was made, and also opens the way for similar studies to be carried out on clay objects from around the world.

Another Brick in the Wall

The cuneiform brick used in the study can be dated to within the narrow timeframe of 879–869 BCE, based on its inscription, which marks it as a brick used in the construction of Ashurnasirpal II’s palace at Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq). At the time, the city was the capital of the young Neo-Assyrian Empire (c. 883–612 BCE).

Likely made of mud collected near the Tigris River, along with other materials such as chaff, straw, or dung, the brick serves in effect as a time capsule recording the botanical environment surrounding its creation. Through analysis of the ancient DNA of the materials still preserved in the brick, the team was able to identify 34 separate plant species including cabbage, heather, birch, laurels, umbellifers (a family that includes parsley, carrots, and other

flowering plants), and cultivated grasses. “We were absolutely thrilled to discover that ancient DNA, effectively protected from contamination inside a mass of clay, can successfully be extracted from a 2,900-year-old brick,” said Sophia Lund Rasmussen, one of the lead authors of the project.

The DNA sample was obtained from the brick after it was accidentally broken during routine handling at the National Museum of Denmark, where it is stored. While this would normally be an unfortunate occurrence, it allowed the team an exceptional opportunity to gather samples from the inside of the brick, where there was the least chance for contamination or degradation.

Although the botanical remains found within the brick were not particularly surprising, the project serves as proof of concept for future archaeological investigations into ancient DNA. Mudbricks of various sorts are some of the most abundant building materials throughout the ancient Near East. This new method provides archaeologists with a completely new way of exploring the ancient environment, both floral and faunal.

The Rebirth of Archaeology in Iraq

https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/archaeology-today/archaeology-in-iraq/

Archaeology on the rise in Iraq after years of war

Looking past two lamassu at the National Museum in Baghdad.

After a nearly 20-year hiatus, archaeology in Iraq is experiencing a rebirth. Following the political instability that resulted from the Iraq War in 2003 and the rise of the Islamic State in the early 2010s, museums are finally reopening and archaeologists are returning to excavate millennia-old dig sites. Among the sites being excavated is the ancient Babylonian city of Larsa. Meanwhile, as Iraq's National Museum is reopening, other Iraqi museums continue the hard work of restoring, rebuilding, and reclaiming their collections.

Archaeology in Iraq: Archaeologists Return

With stability returning to Iraq, international archaeologists and researchers have been slowly returning to the country to work beside local experts. Modern Iraq covers much of ancient Mesopotamia and, as such, is a treasure trove of archaeology. The region boasts cities dating back to the Sumerian period (fifth–third millennia B.C.E.). One particular site that has witnessed the return of international excavation is the ancient Babylonian city of Larsa, which served as the capital of the region until the reign of the famous Hammurabi (r. 1792–1750 B.C.E.). The massive city of Larsa is over 500

acres in size and is now being excavated by an international team of European and Iraqi archaeologists. Already the team has uncovered the magnificent palace of an ancient ruler and dozens of cuneiform tablets written in Akkadian.

Archaeology in Iraq: The National Museum

Archaeology in Iraq is returning to other places as well. On March 7, 2022, the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad reopened its doors to the public. Many of the museum's pieces date back thousands of years. This includes the treasures of the Assyrian palace at Kalhu, built by King Assurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 B.C.E.). Although the museum holds over five millennia of history, it is only a small fragment of its previous glory. The museum was famously looted following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, and to date, the Iraqi government has only been able to recover around a third of the 15,000 artifacts previously held by the museum. However, Iraq as a whole is quickly regaining many other stolen items, with 18,000 artifacts returned to Iraq in 2021 alone, many from American collections.

Archaeology in Iraq: Mosul Museum Rebuilds

Meanwhile, other parts of the country are still working to reverse years of political instability that led to the loss of countless cultural sites and incredible archaeological artifacts. With the aid of international museums like the Louvre and the Smithsonian, the Mosul Museum is beginning to restore thousands of items that were smashed and broken when the Islamic State took control of the city in 2014. At the time, the Islamic State released videos of their members smashing the larger objects in the museum with hammers while they sold smaller objects through the black market to fund their war efforts. Much of the museum remains in ruins today, but local museum staff and international experts are hard at work fitting the pieces back together, quite literally in some cases, like a giant jigsaw puzzle. Thanks to repatriation efforts, large grants, and assistance from international scholars, the Mosul Museum hopes to reopen in about five years. However, many objects will likely never be restored, being either lost on the black market or destroyed beyond recognition.

Slowly, Iraqi Antiquities Begin to Return

https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/news/slowly-iraqi-antiquities-begin-to-return/

February 06, 2012
Germany last week returned 45 ancient artifacts to Iraq that were stolen and looted from the country's museums and archaeological sites following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion. The artifacts, including a 6,500-year-old gold jar, the head of a Sumerian battle axe and several cuneiform tablets, had been seized by German police during public auctions and were formally returned to Iraqi officials last Monday during an official ceremony. An estimated 15,000 artifacts were stolen from Iraq's National Museum in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, with thousands more having been looted from the country's numerous archaeological sites in the years since. Iraqi officials believe as many as 10,000 museum objects are still missing, and have vowed to continue to track them down. "We are heading in coming months to retrieve Iraqi artifacts from Britain, from the United States of America and Canada," said Abbas al-Quraishi, head of Iraq's artifact retrieval department. "We will follow Iraq's antiquities wherever they are."

Germany last week returned 45 ancient artifacts to Iraq that were stolen and looted from the country's museums and archaeological sites following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion.

The Ten Lost Tribes

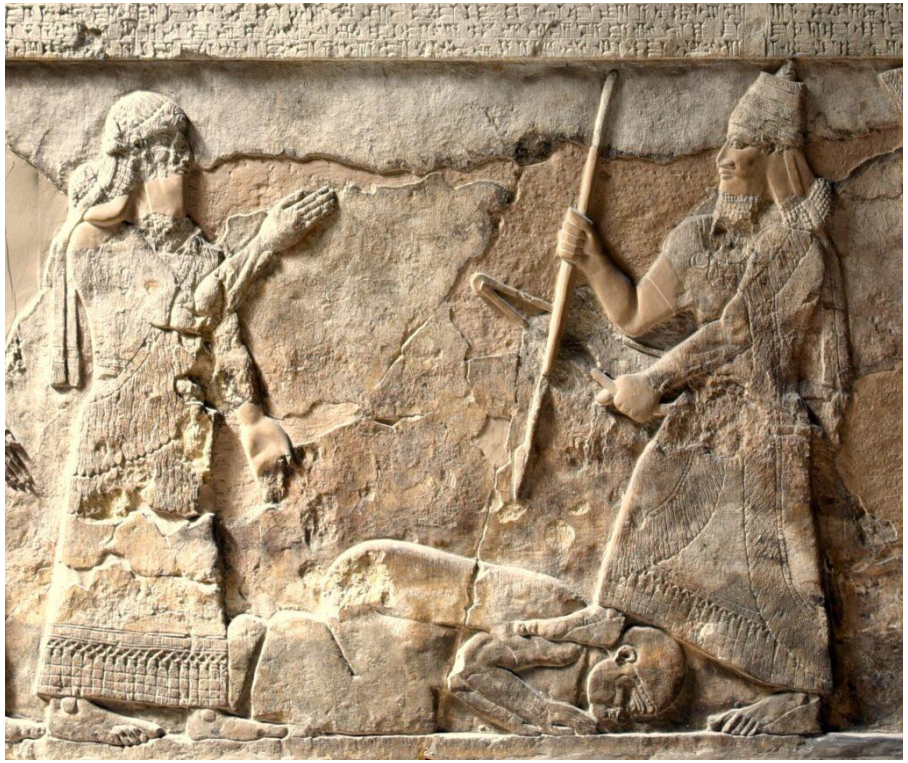
https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-sites-places/biblical-archaeology-sites/ten-lost-tribes/

Evidence of the Assyrian conquest of Israel

Israelite deportees in a relief from the Central Palace at Nimrud, around 730 BCE.

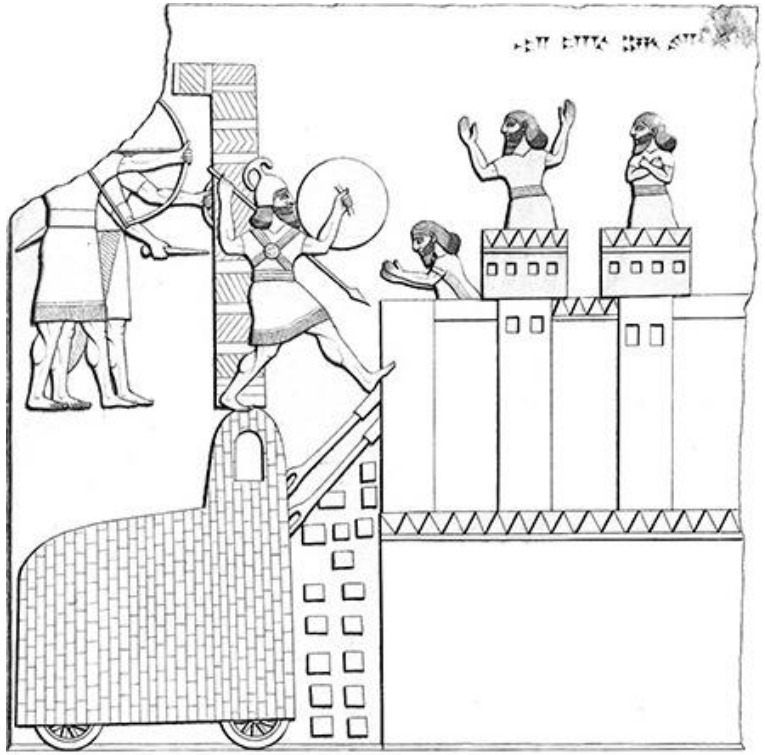
“So Israel was exiled from their own land to Assyria until this day.” This is how the Book of 2 Kings summarizes the Assyrian conquest of Israel (17:23). In what was a culmination of more than a century-long confrontation between Israel and Assyria, King Sargon II captured the capital city of Samaria in 721 BCE and exiled thousands of Israelites to Assyria. A later biblical tradition recorded in 2 Kings 17 then established the myth of the “ten lost tribes” of Israel: “None was left but the tribe of Judah alone” (18).

In the Winter 2024 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, the eminent biblical archaeologist William G. Dever looks at what archaeology has to say about the Assyrian conquest of Israel in the late eighth century. A former director of the W.F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem who also excavated at Gezer between 1966 and 1971, Dever focuses on the material evidence from this prominent Israelite city. First, however, he discusses the biblical account that purports to explain the final demise of the Northern Kingdom of Israel as God’s punishment.



The Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III places his foot on the neck of an enemy.

According to 2 Kings 17:7–8, the ten tribes of Israel were lost “because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of the land of Egypt from under the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They had worshipped other gods and walked in the customs of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel, and in the customs that the kings of Israel had introduced.” For the biblical authors, this meant, explains Dever, that “the *true* ‘Israel’ was Judah, which survived, while the lands and tribes of the north were irrevocably lost, their peoples exiled to Assyria and abandoned by Yahweh. From these traumatic and divisive events eventually emerged the enduring myth of the ‘ten lost tribes’ of Israel.”



Siege of Gezer in a relief from Tiglath-Pileser III's royal palace in Nimrud.

Turning finally to Gezer, which was strategically situated on the border between the northern and southern kingdoms, Dever reports on the main architectural features of the city and explores the evidence of the Assyrian conquest: "In the late eighth century, the city's new outer wall was breached just east of the gate, and both the four-chamber gate and Palace 8000, along with the nearby four-room house, were violently destroyed. … Inside the double walls of the casemate, we encountered more than 5 feet of burnt destruction debris above the room's cobbled floor."

As is depicted in a now-lost relief from Tiglath-Pileser III's royal palace in Nimrud (see above), Assyrian soldiers used siege machines to scale the city's walls. They also likely used a battering ram against the wooden gate and threw up burning wood to weaken the mudbrick superstructure. As they did in other conquered cities, the Assyrians then massacred much of the population and exiled the rest. Deporting conquered people and replacing them with different groups was a long-standing Assyrian tradition. The "ten lost tribes" of Israel were taken to Assyria, from which they never returned, despite the prophets' hope that "a saving remnant" might return to the land one day.

Gezer’s gate and the abutting casemate wall show evidence of the Assyrian destruction of the city in 732 BCE.

As expressed by such biblical prophets as Micah (2:12; 5:5–7), Amos (9:15), and even Hosea (14:7), the disobedient people of Israel were expected to eventually return and usher in a new golden age. “But their optimism in this case, while admirable, was misguided. The ‘ten lost tribes’ of Israel disappeared from history, leaving only the two southern tribes of Benjamin and Judah,” concludes Dever.

To further explore the biblical and archaeological evidence for the ten lost tribes, read William G. Dever’s article “How the Ten Tribes of Israel Were Lost,” published in the Winter 2024 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*.

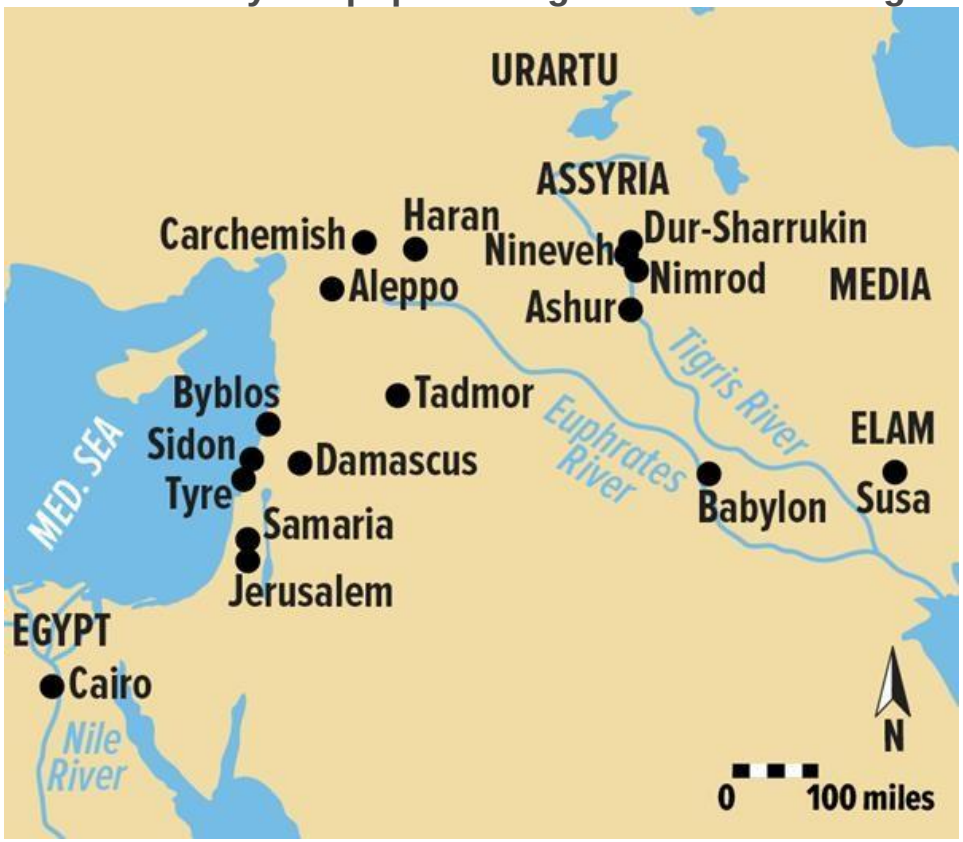
10 Things to Know About the Assyrian Empire

https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-near-eastern-world/10-things-to-know-about-the-assyrian-empire/

Who were the Assyrians?

The Assyrians referenced in the Hebrew Bible were a mighty force that exerted power over much of the Near East, including Israel and Judah, in the ninth through seventh centuries B.C.E. In **"Biblical Archaeology 101: Who Were the Assyrians?"** in the May/June 2019 issue of **BAR**, ancient Near Eastern studies professor Christopher B. Hays describes the Assyrians' beginnings more than a millennium before they appeared in the Bible and how they expanded their empire from Urartu to Egypt. Below, learn 10 fascinating facts about the Assyrians.

1. The Assyrian population grew around the region known as Mesopotamia in modern-day Iraq.



Nourished by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, the cities of Mesopotamia—Greek for "the land between two rivers"—flourished from the 20th century to the end of the seventh century B.C.E. As the Assyrians created and expanded their empire, their political reach came to encompass—at its zenith around 680 B.C.E.—the Fertile Crescent, Egypt, central Anatolia, and western Iran.

2. Akkadian was the *lingua franca* of the ancient Near East.

The earliest known Semitic language, Akkadian comprises both the Assyrian and Babylonian dialects. The name Akkadian comes from the capital city of Akkad, established by King Sargon around 2300 B.C.E. Hundreds of thousands of inscriptions dating from the 26th century B.C.E. to the first century C.E. attest to the pervasiveness of the cuneiform-based writing system.

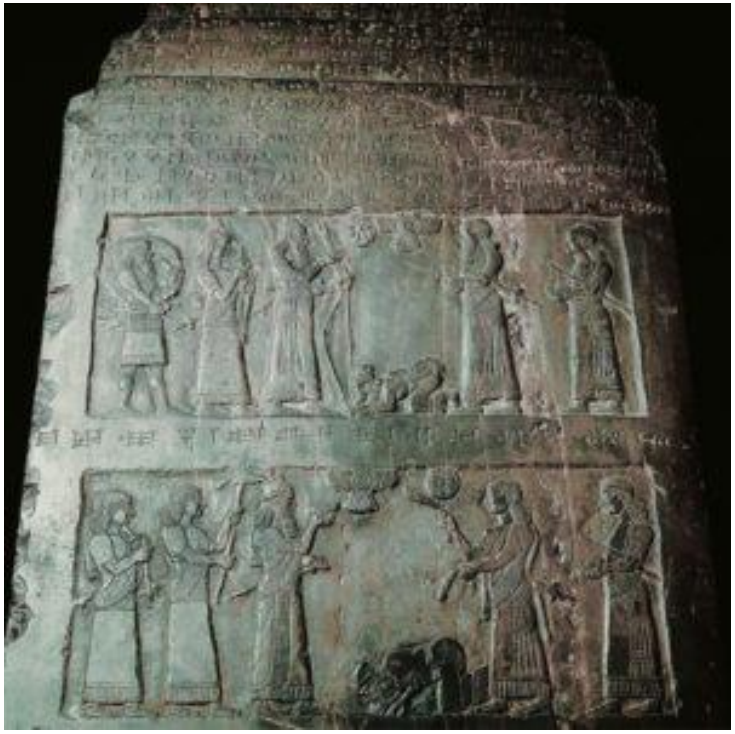
3. The Assyrians of the Bible were part of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the Assyrians who again and again came into conflict with Israel and Judah were part of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (c. 1000–609 B.C.E.). Detailed inscriptions and imposing reliefs attest to the strength of their reign across the Middle East.

4. Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 B.C.E.) is thought of as the founder of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

Ashurnasirpal II established the city of Kalhu (biblical Calah, modern Nimrud) as the capital of his kingdom, lavishly outfitting it with a walled citadel, palace, temples, and gardens paid for through taxes, trade, and tribute from vassal nations.

5. Shalmaneser III's famous Black Obelisk describes King Jehu of Israel paying tribute to the Assyrians.



A close-up of the 6.5-foot-tall Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III.

The 6.5-foot-tall Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (r. 858–824 B.C.E.) features 20 reliefs depicting five defeated kings bringing tribute before the Neo-Assyrian monarch. The prostrate figure in the bottom panel (see image right) is thought to be King Jehu, although some scholars have called this identification into question.

6. According to the Bible, the Israelite king Menahem taxed landowners to pay for tributes to the Assyrian Empire.

During his campaign in the region around 738 B.C.E., Tiglath-pileser III received tribute from Menahem in exchange for the Israelite king's independence. Menahem, in turn, taxed every landowner 50 shekels of silver (2 kings 15:19–20).

7. Assyrian king Sargon II (r. 721–705 B.C.E.) faced rebellion from Syro-Palestinian states after ascending to the throne.

After defeating the rebels, King Sargon II turned Israel into the province of Samaria and claimed in the so-called Great Summary Inscription that he took more than 27,000 Israelites as booty.

8. Judahite king Hezekiah was prepared for Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E.

Ahead of the Assyrian king Sennacherib's attack on Jerusalem, Hezekiah ordered a tunnel to be dug to the Gihon Spring outside the city wall to ensure that the town's residents would have access to water. The Judahite king also repaired the city walls, built towers, strengthened the Millo, and made sure weapons were in adequate supply (2 Chronicles 32: 5). These efforts kept the Assyrians from invading the city itself, but Sennacherib's Prism listing the Assyrian king's campaigns boasts of having shut up Hezekiah in Jerusalem "like a bird in a cage." In an attempt to end the siege, Hezekiah paid the tribute that he had been withholding.

This small black basalt prism of Esarhaddon records his restoration of the walls and temples in Babylon.

9. There are many similarities between the life of Assyrian king Esarhaddon and the story of Joseph in the Bible.

Like the story of Joseph from the Book of Genesis, Esarhaddon was favored by his father over his older brothers and had to flee to a foreign land for safety. After eventually gaining the throne, Esarhaddon pacified the land and expanded the Assyrian Empire southward into Egypt between 675 and 671 B.C.E.

10. The Hebrew prophets taunted the fall of Assyria.

Toward the end of the seventh century B.C.E., the Assyrian Empire began its rapid descent. The Babylonians, together with the Medes and Scythians, overtook various Assyrian cities in 615. The Assyrian capital of Nineveh fell in 612 after just three months of battle.

Of Assyria's defeat, Nahum 3:19 says, "All who hear the news about you clap their hands over you." And Ezekiel 31:16 includes Assyria among the fallen empires that went "down to the pit."

The Decline of the Neo-Assyrian Empire

https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/news/the-decline-of-the-neo-assyrian-empire/

Did overpopulation and drought contribute to its collapse?

Assyrian King Sargon II (721–705 B.C.E.), holding the staff of kingship and wearing the royal conical crown, meets with a court official.

The mighty Neo-Assyrian Empire, which came to control the lands between the Mediterranean Sea and the Zagros Mountains as well as Egypt and part of Anatolia, collapsed at the end of the seventh century B.C.E. It is traditionally believed that the empire began to disintegrate due to a series of military conflicts as well as civil unrest. The destruction of the Assyrian capital Nineveh by a coalition of Babylonian and Median invaders in 612 B.C.E. marked

the fall of the empire. A study published in the scientific journal *Climatic Change* argues that a population boom and drought—two factors that have thus far been underexplored—may have contributed to the rapid demise of what some scholars consider the world's first true empire.

The study, led by Adam W. Schneider of the University of California, San Diego, and Selim F. Adalı of Koç University, uses recently published paleoclimate data from various parts of the Near East as well as textual and archaeological evidence to suggest that the region experienced an episode of severe drought in the second half of the seventh century B.C.E. The Assyrian heartland had undergone a population explosion during the late eighth and early seventh centuries, largely due to the forced resettlement of conquered peoples into the empire. The researchers suggest that the major population growth may have greatly hindered the state's ability to withstand the drought that plagued the region in the latter part of the seventh century.

"We strongly suspect that any economic damage inflicted upon the Assyrian Empire by drought would have served as a key stimulus for the increasing unrest which was to characterize its final decades," Schneider and Adalı wrote in their paper.

"At a more global level," the researchers caution, "the fate of the Assyrian Empire also teaches modern societies about the consequences of prioritizing policies intended to maximize short-term economic and political benefit over those which favor long-term economic security and risk mitigation."

Read Schneider and Adalı's paper in *Climatic Change*.

Back to Ugarit

https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-near-eastern-world/back-to-ugarit/

Archaeologists return to northwestern Syria

Stela of Baal with lightning, from acropolis Ugarit.

After nearly a decade and a half, archaeologists have returned to northwestern Syria, digging in the shadow of the important Late Bronze Age (c. 1550–1200 BCE) city of Ugarit. With the conclusion to the lengthy Syrian civil war, which halted nearly all foreign excavations in Syria, a joint Italian-Turkish team has broken ground at Tell Semhane, an unexcavated mound just a few miles from ancient Ugarit that archaeologists believe had close connections with the larger regional center.

Exploring an Ugaritic Settlement

Ugarit was an important Bronze Age city, renowned as a coastal mercantile kingdom with trade connections across the eastern Mediterranean, including with Egypt, Cyprus, the Aegean, the Hittites, Syria, and Canaan. Since Ugarit had particularly close cultural ties to the southern Levant, archaeologists, historians, and biblical scholars have frequently turned to the site for clues about Canaanite culture, thanks especially to the thousands of cuneiform tablets that were discovered there. These tablets were written in various languages, including Ugaritic, an ancient language closely related to Canaanite and biblical Hebrew. The tablets served as a treasure trove of historical information and provided a fascinating look into broader Levantine cultural and religious traditions.

The Tell Semhane excavations aim to add even more to our understanding of ancient Levantine life by examining a previously unexplored settlement within the Ugaritic sphere. “Our goal is to uncover a Bronze Age settlement in its entirety,” Adahan Güney, one of the Turkish Ph.D. students working at the site, told *Arkeonews*. “In Near Eastern archaeology, most projects focus on temples or palaces. Here, we have the rare opportunity to study a complete settlement context, which could transform our understanding of everyday life in the Bronze Age.”

Liens Internet

Biblical Archeology Society (BAS):
https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/

Archaeology News – OnLine Magazine:
https://archaeologymag.com/

National Geographic – Decoding the lost scripts of the ancient world:
https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/decoding-ancient-languages-linear-elamite