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What Is Akkadian?

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Brick inscription of Nebuchadnezzar II, written in Akkadian. *Courtesy Nathan Steinmeyer.*

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Exploring the language of the Babylonians and Assyrians

Akkadian, the language of the ancient Babylonians and Assyrians, was once the lingua franca of the entire Near East. Despite dying out as a language two millennia ago, Akkadian's decipherment in the 18th century unlocked a vast treasure trove of information on the history and peoples of the ancient Near East and the lands of the Bible. But what is Akkadian?

THE LANGUAGE OF AKKAD

Primarily found in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq), evidence of Akkadian is first found in the early third millennium BCE, and the language remained in use until the first century CE. During its height in the second millennium, Akkadian was the predominant language of both the Babylonians and Assyrians, as well as a number of smaller regional entities, and it became the language of international politics and business. From around the mid-first millennium BCE until its final abandonment around the turn of the era, Akkadian was gradually replaced as a spoken language by Aramaic.

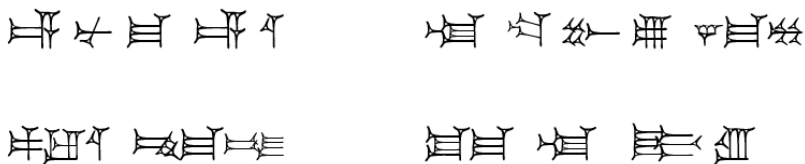
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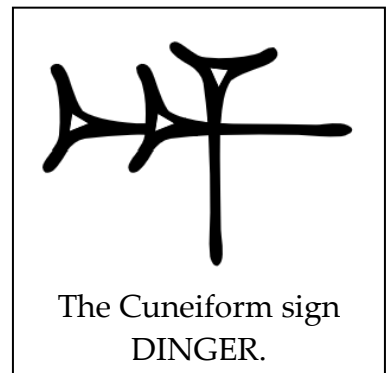
Beyond Mesopotamia, Akkadian documents have been discovered in Egypt, the Levant, Anatolia, the Iranian plateau, the Persian Gulf, and more. The Amarna Letters, written between the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten (r. 1353–1336 BCE) and various Levantine kings, witness how Akkadian was used at the time, even by non-Akkadian speakers, as an intermediary language in cases where the two sides did not share a common tongue.

Used across a wide chronological and geographical span, around a million Akkadian documents have been found. These sources range from everyday business contracts to international treaties, epics, mythological texts, and everything in between. Some of the best-known Akkadian texts today include the Code of Hammurabi, [the Epic of Gilgamesh](#), and the Enuma Elish. Akkadian texts also record many interactions between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and the Babylonian and Assyrian Empires, including [Sennacherib's invasion](#) of Judah in 701 BCE (2 Kings 18–19) and [other events](#) mentioned in the Bible.



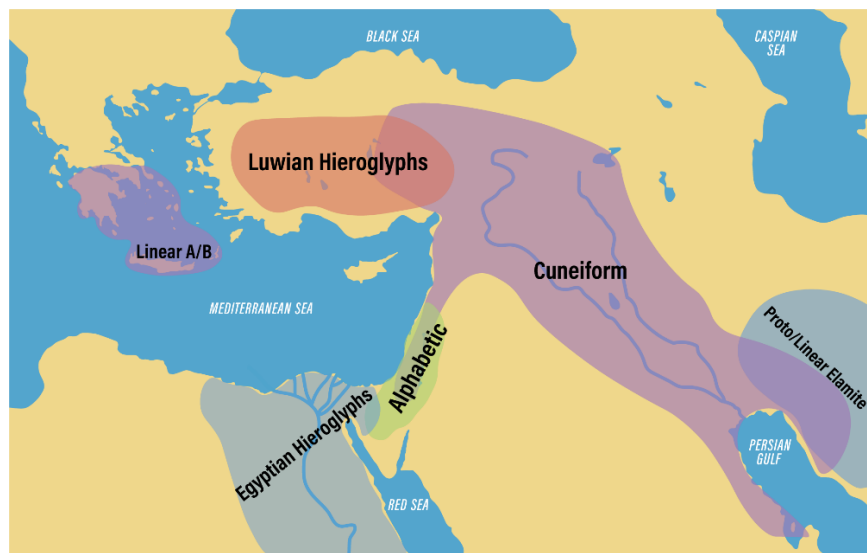
A great example of high literary Akkadian can be found in the opening lines of the Enuma Elish, which closely resemble those of Genesis: *enūma eliš la nabû šamāmu šapliš ammatum šuma la zakru*. “When the heavens above did not exist, and earth beneath had not come into being.”

One of the world’s earliest written languages, Akkadian is also the oldest recorded Semitic language, a language family that includes Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, and more. However, while Hebrew and Aramaic belong to the northwest branch of the Semitic language family, Akkadian belongs to its eastern branch. While a few other languages, such as Eblaite (a language of ancient Ebla), are suggested to also be eastern Semitic, scholars debate if these are truly distinct languages or just dialects of Akkadian. Like other Semitic languages, Akkadian is predominantly a tri-consonantal language, meaning that each “root” word was made of three consonants with vowels, prefixes, and suffixes added to alter the grammatical meaning of the word. Akkadian was made up of 20 consonants, less than most other Semitic languages, such as the 28 found in Arabic or the 22 in Hebrew.



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Like several other Near Eastern languages, Akkadian utilized the cuneiform script, typically written with a reed stylus on a clay tablet. Cuneiform was a logo-syllabic script in which individual signs could be used to represent phonetic values, logograms, or determinatives. To further complicate matters, many signs could be used to represent multiple phonetic values, logograms, and determinatives at the same time, depending on the context, and many signs could have the same phonetic value as well. The sign DINGIR (image on the right) for example, could have the phonetic value *an* or *ilu*. It could have the logographic meaning of “a/the god” or the god “Anu.” Or it could be used as a determinative to denote any god. Over 600 unique cuneiform signs were used to write Akkadian, although only around 150 were commonly used at any one time in a given region.



While many scripts were used throughout the ancient Near East, Cuneiform and the alphabet were the only two to see extensive use outside of their place of origin. *Biblical Archaeology Society.*

One of the most extensively attested and well-represented languages throughout the history of the ancient Near East, Akkadian and its literature form a pillar in any thorough study of the historical and cultural milieu of the biblical world.

© Biblical Archaeology Society, November 3, 2023. Retrieved December 23, 2023.

<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/what-is-akkadian/>

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