

Assyriology – Cuneiform texts and culture

Stefan Jakob, Heidelberg

Assyriology is the science of languages and cultures of the Ancient Near East. The research interest ranges from the earliest cuneiform texts from the fourth millennium BC to the end of cuneiform culture during the first century AD. Assyriology derives its name from the region of the first large discoveries of texts, Assyria. The geographic focus, however, comprises the ancient Mesopotamia (modern Iraq and Syria) as well as the coast of the Levant (Syria and Lebanon), including Egypt. In addition, Asia Minor (mainly Anatolia) and Persia (Iran) are important fields of research.

Assyriologists are working particularly on texts in cuneiform script. The most important languages written down in this system of writing are Akkadian (i. e. Assyrian and Babylonian) and Sumerian. Also of some importance are Hittite, Hurrian and Elamite.

The cuneiform script *per se* was already known in Europe in the first half of the 17th century AD. But scientific approaches actually began in 1802 when the German philologist Georg Friedrich Grotefend identified the meaning of individual cuneiform signs for the first time. He presented his discovery to the professional public in 1837. A further milestone in the development of Assyriology was achieved with the publication of the trilingual rock inscription of Behistun (Iran) about the middle of the 19th century.

The decipherment of ancient Persian cuneiform writing paved the way for the serious research on the more complex writing systems of Babylonian and Elamite language. Over time, it was realized that cuneiform texts used both syllables and word signs, or, more precisely, logograms, phonograms and determinatives. The latter served to indicate the nature of the term to which they belonged. For example the logogram *giš* (‘wood’) before a word made clear that the item in question was of wood.

The decoding of the writing system opened the view for the languages of the Ancient Near East. Assyrian and Babylonian are directly related to Hebrew and Arabic. This made the analysis fundamentally easier. It was, however, not until recent decades that Assyriologists have comprehensive dictionaries at their disposal. With regard to the third main language of Assyriology, Sumerian, that state still has not been achieved. Here the situation is far more difficult because the Sumerian language could not be assigned to any known family of languages, despite many efforts.

Sumerian was commonly spoken in the South of ancient Mesopotamia during the third millennium BC and went extinct after the 17th century BC. Nevertheless, it continued to exist as a literary and scholarly language until the end of cuneiform cultures, similar to Latin in the European Middle Ages.

Back to the 19th century: the early archaeologists were usually diplomats, superficially following their interest in past civilizations while simultaneously acting as a spy for their countries. On the other hand they sent more and more script findings to Europe with whom they enriched museum collections in Great Britain and France. The rediscovery of the Ancient Near East happened at a time when the European citizenship was highly interested in languages and cultures of the Orient in general (although romantically transfigured). Of special significance was the fact that the ancient Assyrian inscriptions mentioned famous personalities, cities and events which were well known from the Bible.

Thus, in the Epic of Gilgamesh, a king of the ancient city of Uruk (biblical Erech) searching for eternal life, a passage was found which resembled the biblical tale of the Flood in numerous details.

Initially, the scholarly debate between the emerging science of Assyriology (in Germany, the first chair was funded in 1875 at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, today Humboldt-Universität at Berlin) and theologians was a constructive one. A key question was a chicken and egg issue: What was there first? Assyria or the Biblical tradition?

This changed dramatically after a speech made by the German Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch, January 13, 1902 in Berlin, in the presence of the German Emperor Wilhelm II. Delitzsch argued that Jewish religion was deeply rooted in Babylonian culture. Both conservative Jewish circles and Christians were bitterly hostile towards him and did not shy away from personal defamation. But Delitzsch was adhering to his position. This verbal exchange went down in history of research as the so-called Bible Babel dispute (in German Bibel-Babel-Streit). Following the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, this discussion became a secondary issue. Some ideas, however, continue to occur as questions of the popular sciences.

Due to the fact that the debate between Delitzsch and his adversaries was conducted in public, there was a growing interest in findings of the excavations in the Middle East and the Ancient Near Eastern philology. At the beginning of the 20th century, archaeological field work in the Orient was increasingly intensified. Excavators mainly dedicated their attention to

the major cities of the Assyrians and Babylonians, Assur and Babylon on the one hand, and the rich world of the Sumerian city states on the other hand. The year 1906 saw the start of excavations in Boghazkale in Anatolia, the suspected location of Hattusa, the capital of the Hittites which were already known from other ancient sources. On this occasion, thousands of cuneiform texts in a previously unknown language were excavated. Bedřich Hrozný, a Czech, proved in 1915 that ‚Hittite’ (as they called this language) belongs to the Indo-European family of languages, with some similarity to Latin and Greek. Thus, the ‚pedigree’ of Assyriology was provided with a new branch, Hittitology. After the foundation of Czechoslovakia, Hrozný became professor of cuneiform writing and history of the Ancient Near East in Prague.

A dark chapter of Assyriology began in 1933 after the National Socialists seized power in Germany. Jewish scholars were systematically excluded from academic teaching. Benno Landsberger, for example, who had held teaching and research positions at several German universities, was dismissed in 1935 and accepted an appointment at the University of Ankara where he played a significant role in the development of a faculty of languages, history and geography. In 1948, Landsberger moved to the prestigious Oriental Institute in Chicago. One year earlier, A. Leo Oppenheim, another Jewish scholar who had been removed from office by the Nazis, started work at the same place. In this manner, the measures against Jewish researchers unintentionally contributed to the internationalization of Assyriology.

After World War II, the community of Assyriologists grew rapidly. In 1950, an international conference by name of ‚Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale’ came into being. The goal was to offer a platform to present new research and discussion. This first attempt was considered very successful, so that the ‚Rencontre’ is taking place every year since then.

A decisive turning point in Assyriological research was the first Gulf War in 1991. Any archaeological fieldwork had to be stopped, due to political security situation. This then led to a focus on excavations in Syria. Between 1992 and 2010 numerous new texts were unearthed there. But meanwhile the pendulum is swinging back. The civil war in Syria has brought any projects to a standstill. Instead, several archaeological teams are working in the Kurdish-dominated provinces of Iraq. The first results from these projects make hope for good prospects.

Outlook

In Germany alone, Assyriology is currently taught at thirteen sites. In addition, numerous other departments at universities all over the world conduct teaching and research. As we

have seen above, the amount of text material is increasing practically by the day. Thus, working on primary sources will occupy researchers even for generations to come.

But that is precisely where the future challenges lie in connection with the present structure of universities. Many humanities, especially small subjects, are now trying to utilize modern theories of social and cultural sciences. Creating a high degree of interdisciplinary orientation is a major concern. Such ideas, however, only play a minor part in current Assyriological teaching and research. This is due to several reasons: After little more than 150 years since its very beginning, Assyriology is still largely concerned with exploring primary sources to make them available to the scientific community. In this way a substantial amount of capacity has been tied up. There is another aspect, too: Many key works of ancient Mesopotamian literature still are fragmentary and incomplete, notwithstanding the great efforts and progress made in recent decades.

From the viewpoint of many Assyriologists the relevance of theoretical models such as the narrative theory is rather limited when applied to Ancient Near Eastern genres of literature. Nevertheless, Assyriology will have to take a position on it so that it is not only perceived as an edition philology in the future. There are fears among researchers that there is only a small time frame, before Assyriology and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in general will fall below the level achieved by comparative disciplines (with corresponding implications for the financing options of future projects). Therefore, understanding how to manage the balancing act between the requirements that come from outside the Assyriology and its own needs has to be an important characteristic of scholars within the next few years. If that can be done, Assyriology will continue to play a role in the academic landscape of the future.

The author is research associate within the research project [“Edition of literary cuneiform texts from Assur”](#) of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. (08/2017)