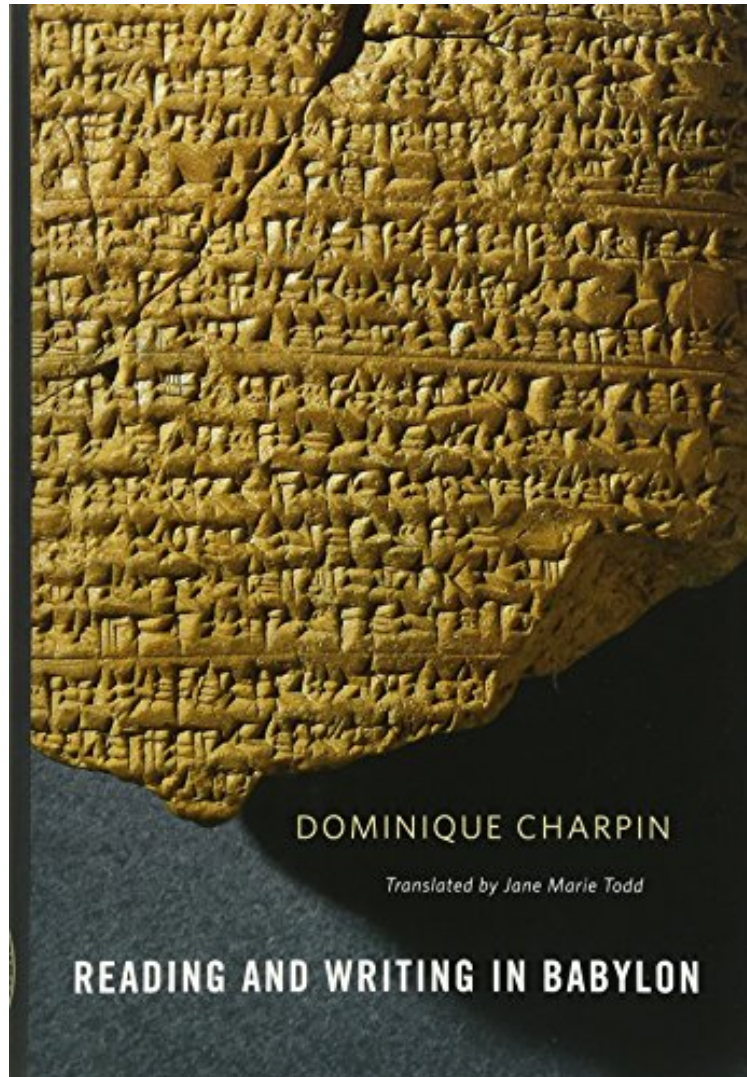


Reading and Writing in Babylon

Dominique Charpin

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#383002 in Books 2011-01-03 2010-11-22 Original language: French PDF # 1 8.42 x 1.07 x 5.941, 1.18 #File Name: 0674049683336 pages | File size: 41.Mb

Dominique Charpin : Reading and Writing in Babylon before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Reading and Writing in Babylon:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. All you wanted to know about writing and reading cuneiform tablets By T. Webster This is an outstanding book by Dominique Charpin, Professor of Mesopotamian History at the Sorbonne in Paris, and scholar at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, on reading and writing in the cuneiform culture of ancient Mesopotamia, from the invention of writing in the late 4th millennium BCE (circa 3200) to end of Mesopotamian supremacy in the region toward the middle of the first century BCE following the Persian and Greek invasions. Charpin discusses just about everything you could want to know about cuneiform texts and how they were

used by governments and merchants during almost 3000 years of Sumerian, Assyrian, and Babylonian dominance in the area now known as Iraq. He describes the materials: refined clay and a variety of styli with wedge-shaped ends (cuneiform means wedge-shaped). I am not a specialist in Assyriology, so I cannot address the fine points of debate in the academic world about the topics Charpin addresses, but it appears that he is an acknowledged expert in the field and a number of the scholarly references in this book are familiar to me from other reading. Some inscriptions were made on stone, such as the famous stele with the Code of Hammurabi, but most were made on small clay tablets. The tablets were small enough to hold in one hand. When the writer had filled the front surface with writing using stylized characters derived from pictograms, he (nearly always he) would either turn it over and keep writing or start another tablet. The speed of the writer mattered, because as the clay began to dry out, the writing surface became harder, and it was more difficult to make clean marks in the clay surface. When the document was finished, it was allowed to air dry. Only special tablets intended for repeated use were fired like pottery for hardness. As a result, the tablets that survived to our time were buried in dry dirt and ruined buildings for two thousand years or more. Most cuneiform writing is in the Sumerian and Akkadian languages, the languages of ancient Sumer and Akkad. Akkadian continued to be used even as peoples in the area began speaking different languages due to invasions and rivalries between kingdoms, much as the Western world used Latin long after the collapse of the Roman Empire. The most famous of the cuneiform writings are now known as the Gilgamesh Epic and the Enuma Elish, the Mesopotamian creation story that relates the exploits of the god Marduk. Cuneiform writing was quickly perceived as an innovation of great practicality, not only for accounting, but enabling a king or court official or general to send a message to someone many miles away. Tablet letters that were confidential were enclosed in a clay envelope that was imprinted with the sender's seal. If the clay envelope was broken, the recipient knew the letter had been read. Charpin describes and quotes from a wide variety of messages, mostly from the late second and early first millennium. His approach is encyclopedic, making it impossible in a brief review to mention all the topics he covers. Suffice it to say he discusses the technology of writing, the likely incidence of literacy, the teaching of writing, the practice of reading letters out loud to the recipient, the need for literate secretaries and the difficulties of maintaining confidentiality of messages, standards for dating and situating cuneiform texts, modes of address, formulaic blessings and curses, and much more. If you have ever wondered about cuneiform writing and want to dig into the subject deeply, this would be an excellent introduction. The text was composed in French and translated into English. Charpin says in his preface that this edition is a revised version of the French edition. He says he wanted to reach a wide audience and so wrote in a less technical manner than he would for his fellow Assyriologists. The translation reads well, though it often seems somewhat more scholarly than popular. Anyone with a few college literature or history courses in their background should find this book informative. The text is augmented with 51 black and white photographs and diagrams of tablets of various types. The descriptions under the illustrations are succinct and interesting. All sources are cited with in-text references, and side issues are occasionally taken up in endnotes. The bibliography is full and up to date (prior to publication). This would make an interesting gift for someone you know (yourself?) who has an interest in ancient history or the development of writing technology. Given the usual price of academic press books, which can cost \$100 or more, this one is a great bargain. Highly recommended. 15 of 15 people found the following review helpful. Good introduction to the history of cuneiform writing. By William S. Monroe This book will not teach you to read cuneiform, but it deals with the history of the writing, and of reading and writing in general in ancient Mesopotamia. Written by a respected scholar in the field, but for a lay audience. The author has some definite opinions, and points out where controversies lay (such as in the extent of literacy in the ancient Near East). A good book for anyone who may be interested in the history of reading and writing. 3 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Four Stars By Phillip Cruz great read for a novice like me good read.

Over 5,000 years ago, the history of humanity radically changed direction when writing was invented in Sumer, the southern part of present-day Iraq. For the next three millennia, kings, aristocrats, and slaves all made intensive use of cuneiform script to document everything from royal archives to family records. In engaging style, Dominique Charpin shows how hundreds of thousands of clay tablets testify to the history of an ancient society that communicated broadly through letters to gods, insightful commentary, and sales receipts. He includes a number of passages, offered in translation, that allow readers an illuminating glimpse into the lives of Babylonians. Charpin's insightful overview discusses the methods and institutions used to teach reading and writing, the process of apprenticeship, the role of archives and libraries, and various types of literature, including epistolary exchanges and legal and religious writing. The only book of its kind, *Reading and Writing in Babylon* introduces Mesopotamia as the birthplace of civilization, culture, and literature while addressing the technical side of writing and arguing for a much wider spread of literacy than is generally assumed. Charpin combines an intimate knowledge of cuneiform with a certain breadth of vision that allows this book to transcend a small circle of scholars. Though it will engage a broad general audience, this book also fills a critical academic gap and is certain to become the standard reference on the topic.

From Publishers Weekly This introduction to the birth of cuneiform writing in the Babylonian empire is an engaging

primer on the lexicon of linguistics. Cuneiform writing, with its three dimensional requirement of light and shade, included 600 characters, all possessing either a syllabic (phonetic) or logographic value that showed both sound and meaning. It's all about communication: clay tablets were put in clay envelopes; to learn characters, students traced them; and scholars copied manuscripts to preserve them. Tablets of contracts, laws, and even literary works were archived and collected in libraries. Thus we have the Epic of Gilgamesh from the second millennium, telling us the story of the deluge. By the first millennium, it wasn't only scribes who could read and write but also administrators, generals, and even their wives. The fires of war baked the clay tablets, safeguarding them for future research (there is an inventory of 500,000 texts). Charpin has written a scholarly work of incredible breadth; read with reference books at the ready to discover an ancient world not so different from our own. (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved. Many books have been written on the origins of the cuneiform script and the role of reading and writing in Mesopotamia. But Charpin's book has no rival that could even stand in its shade. (Karel van der Toorn, President, University of Amsterdam, and author of *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible*) Charpin takes up a subject that's been debated by Assyriologists for many years: Did scribes alone have the knowledge to read and write cuneiform, the earliest writing, invented by the Sumerians around 3200 B.C.E.? Charpin focuses on what may be called the 'classical' period of Mesopotamian civilization, the period between the Babylonian rulers Hammurabi (1792-1750 B.C.E.) to Nebuchadnezzar (604-562 B.C.E.). Charpin's work at Ur some 20 years ago convinced him that what was thought to be a school was in fact a residence for clergy who home trained their children and apprentices to read and write cuneiform. His research has convinced him that literacy was not limited to professional scribes. The depth and range of material Charpin includes is indeed impressive. In sections that will be of particular interest to lay readers and students, Charpin goes into detail about reading a cuneiform tablet and the apprenticeship of a scribe. He informs the reader that the oral, spoken word Sumerian or Akkadian was most important in Mesopotamian society, and it was the survival of the written over the spoken word that produced the expansion of writing. Required reading for scholars in the field and their students. (Joan W. Gartland *Library Journal* 2010-10-01) This introduction to the birth of cuneiform writing in the Babylonian empire is an engaging primer on the lexicon of linguistics Charpin has written a scholarly work of incredible breadth. (Publishers Weekly 2011-01-24) [Reading and Writing in Babylon] is a groundbreaking and fascinating contribution to the study of ancient literacy, readable by all-comers. (Eleanor Robson *Times Literary Supplement* 2011-07-23) Charpin has written a book that is accessible to those outside the small academic field of Assyriology. The work is remarkable for its level of detail and the breadth of its concern. Charpin is able to keep one eye on the specifics of numerous texts and their archaeological contexts. At the same time, he is able to situate the written legacy of these ancient cultures in a broad sociological context, while arguing in some places for a generally new approach to reading and integrating the wealth of material into cognate fields. (Phillip Michael Sherman *Bryn Mawr Classical* 2012-06-01) About the Author Dominique Charpin is Professor of Mesopotamian History at the Sorbonne, Paris.