



Origins of Writing

STORIES OF DECIPHERMENT (CTD.)

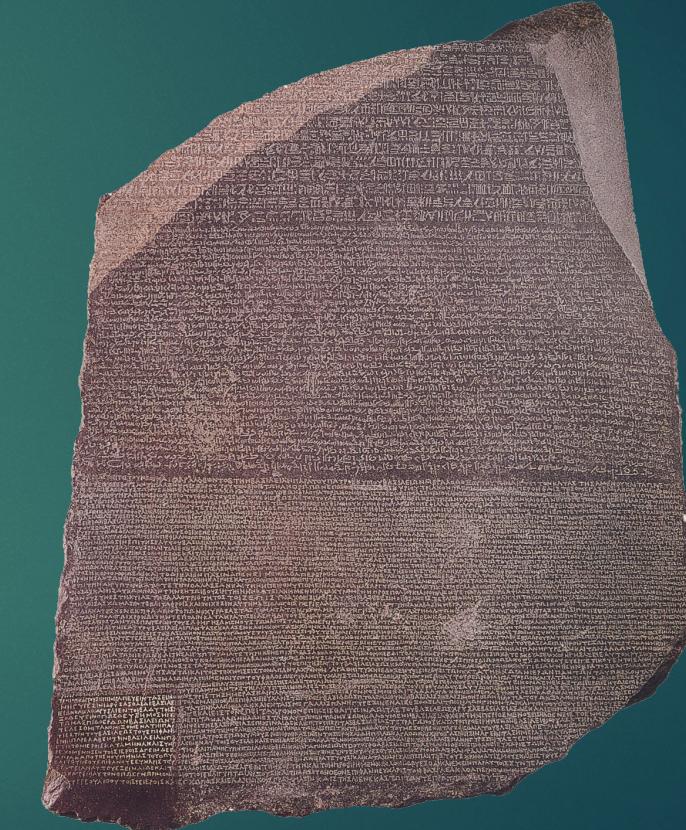
Old Persian Cuneiform

- ▶ (Semi-)Alphabetic writing system, which was partially inspired by Mesopotamian cuneiform.
 - ▶ 3 vowel signs (a, i, and u)
 - ▶ 13 consonant signs (without indication of following vowel)
 - ▶ 20 consonant signs (with indication of following vowel)
 - ▶ 8 ideograms
 - ▶ 1 word divider
 - ▶ Number signs

Decipherment



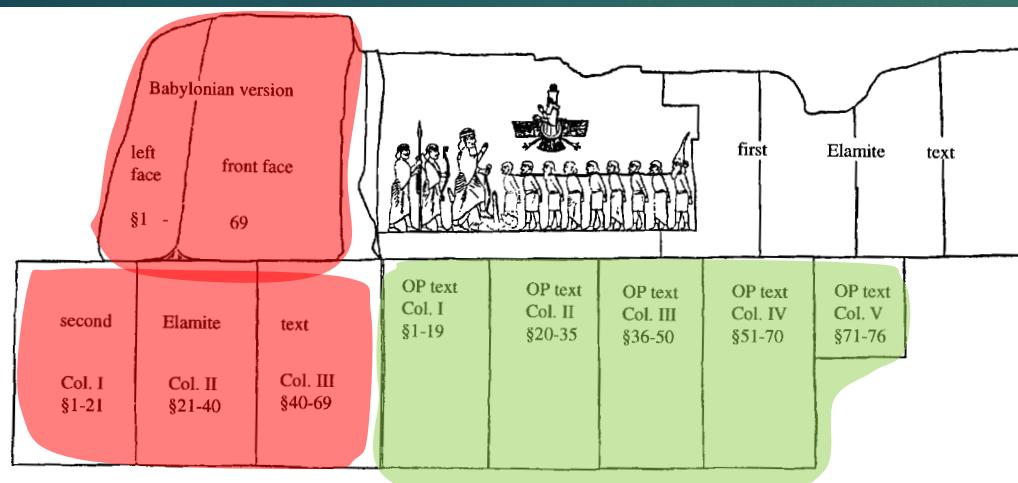
Trilingual inscriptions of Darius and Xerxes
at Ganjnameh, Iran



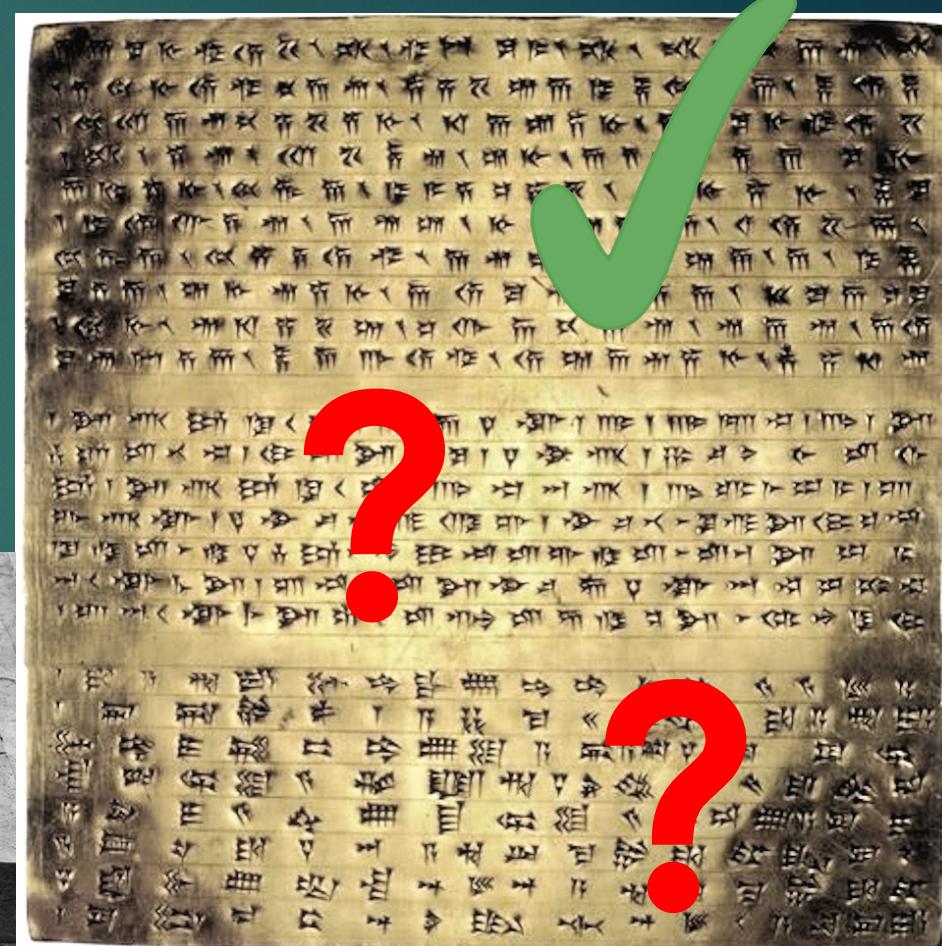
Decipherment

MESOPOTAMIAN CUNEIFORM

- ▶ The decipherment of Old Persian allowed now access to Mesopotamian cuneiform (Babylonian and Elamite).
- ▶ But: Old Persian is an **invented system**. Although the signs imitate the wedge-based character of Mesopotamian cuneiform, they are otherwise not related.



Gold foundation
tablet of Darius (r.
522–486 BCE)

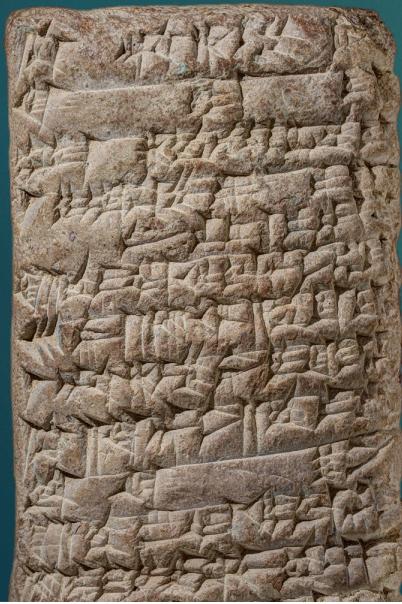




Decipherment

MESOPOTAMIAN CUNEIFORM

- ▶ Mesopotamian cuneiform spread to all areas in Western Asia and was used for many different languages: Sumerian, Akkadian, Elamite, Hittite, Hurrian, Urartian, Ugaritic, Egyptian, ...



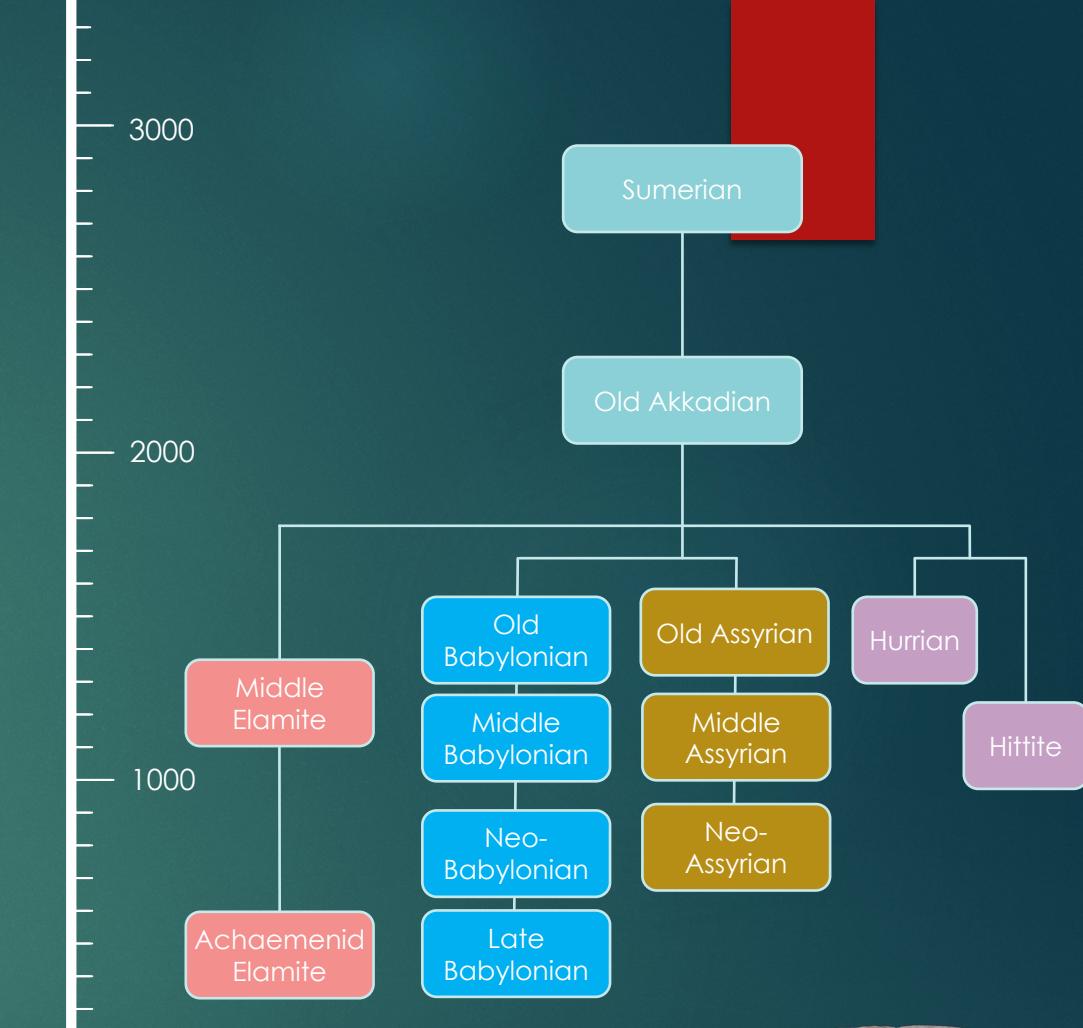
Old Assyrian
letter



Old Babylonian letter



Middle Elamite brick (Susa)



Decipherment

MESOPOTAMIAN CUNEIFORM

- ▶ Mesopotamian cuneiform signs are polyvalent. Each character can have a multitude of readings depending on the context it appears in.
- ▶ Mesopotamian scribes could choose whether to write a word syllabically, use a logogram, or a logogram with phonetic complement.

šarrum, "king"

ša-ar-ru-um



šar-ru-um



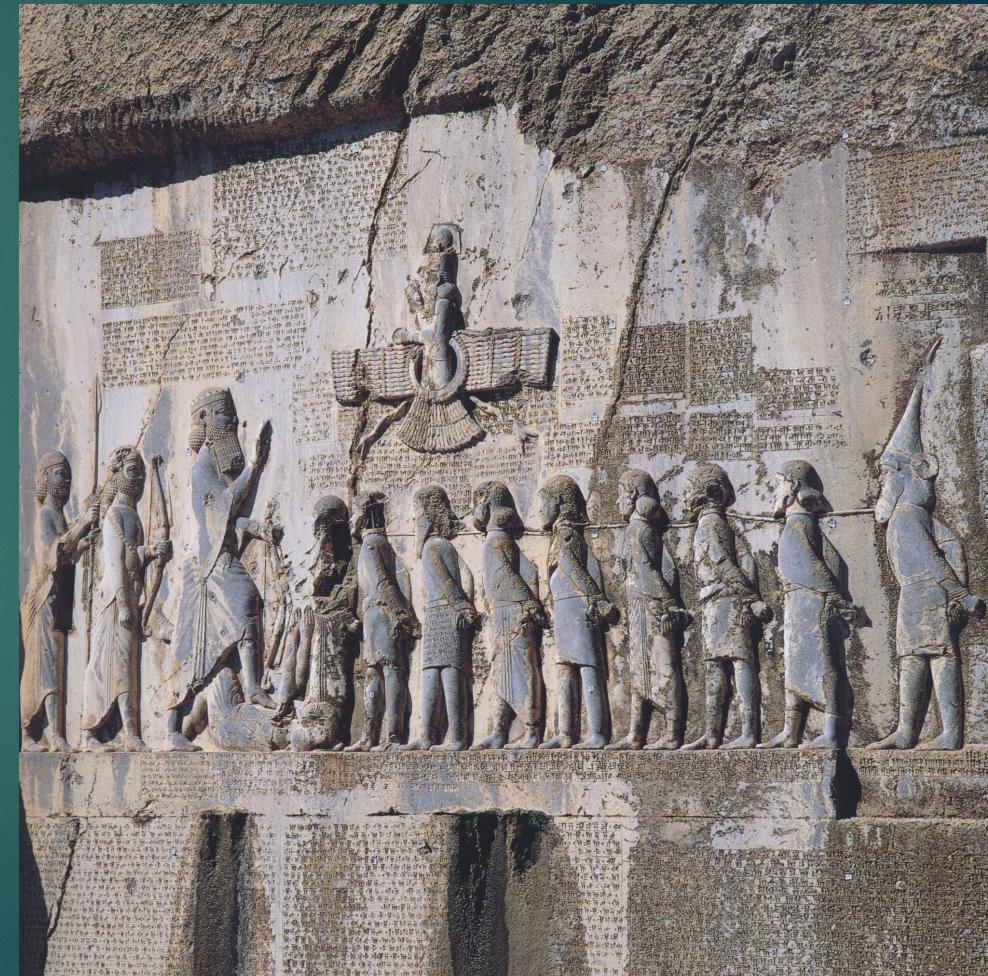
šar-rum



LUGAL



LUGAL-rum

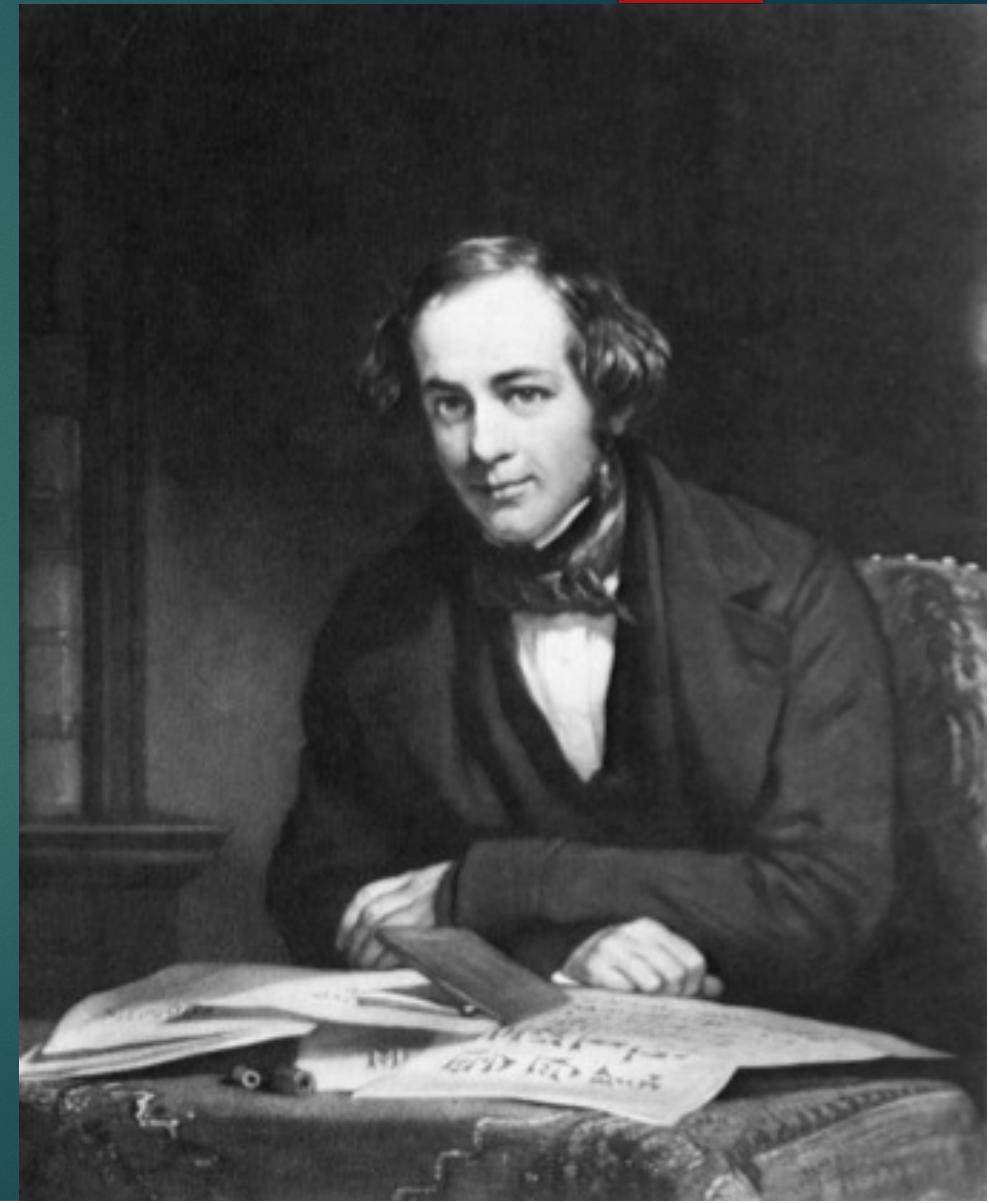


Darius's Bisitun inscription

Decipherment

MESOPOTAMIAN CUNEIFORM

- ▶ **Henry Creswicke Rawlinson (1810–1895)**
 - ▶ Like Old Persian, Rawlinson tried to identify proper names in the trilingual inscriptions.
 - ▶ By 1850, Rawlinson identified sound values for 150 cuneiform signs (i.e., a quarter of the whole inventory); 50 homophones thanks to variant spellings, but also signs that could have very different sounds. He also identified roughly 200 words.



IRAN

ACHAEMENID PERIOD

Alabaster vase inscribed in four languages

Xerxes, the Great King

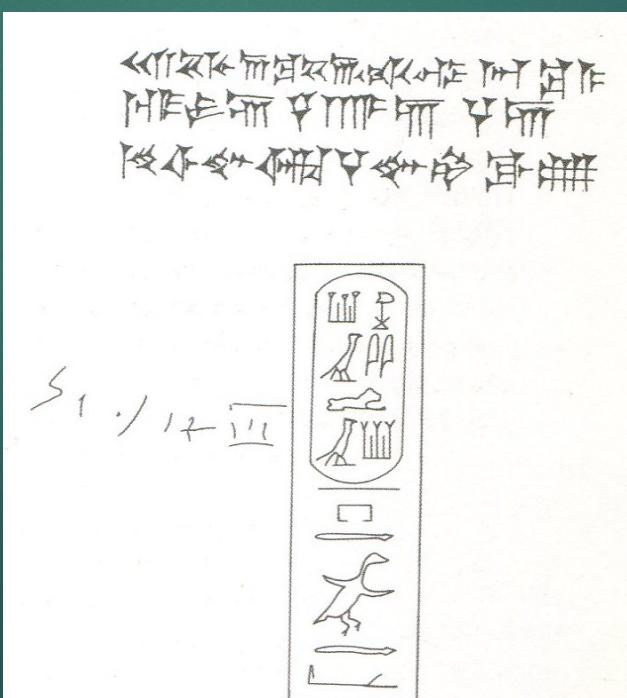
Old Persian: xšyarša

Elamite: **ik-še-ir-ša₂**

Akkadian: **hi-ši-'-ar-ša₂-'**

Egyptian: h3š3y3r3š3

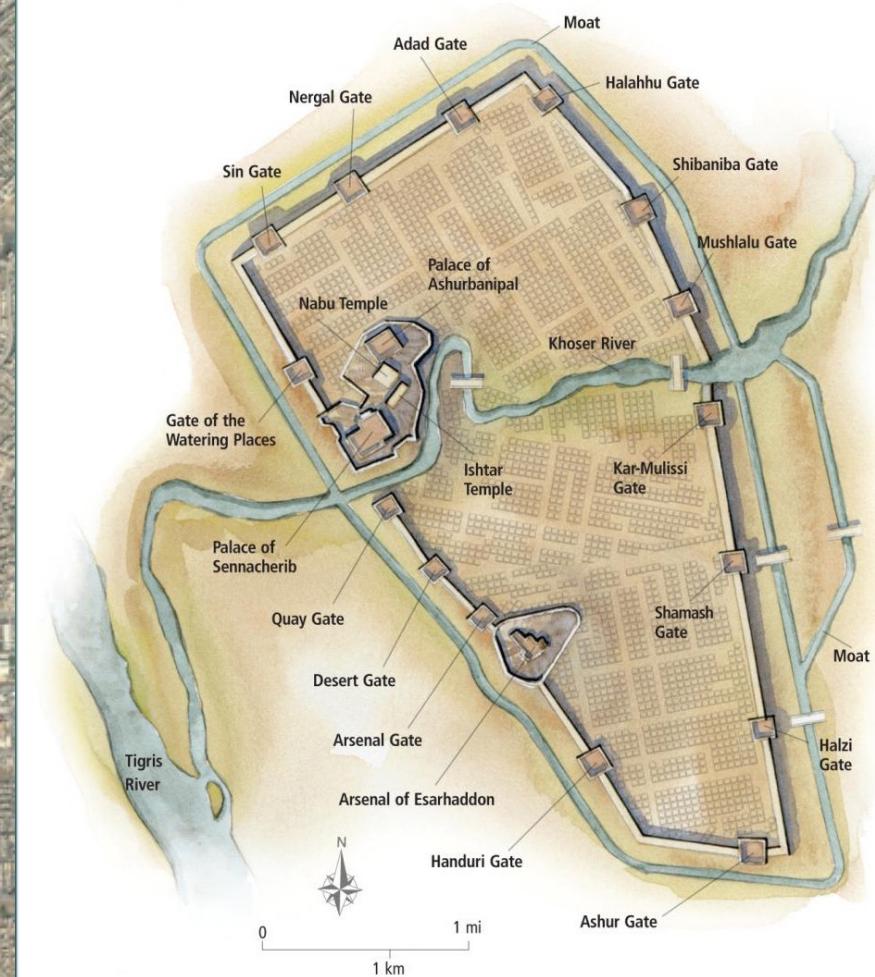
Xerxes (r. 486–465 BCE)



Decipherment

MESOPOTAMIAN CUNEIFORM

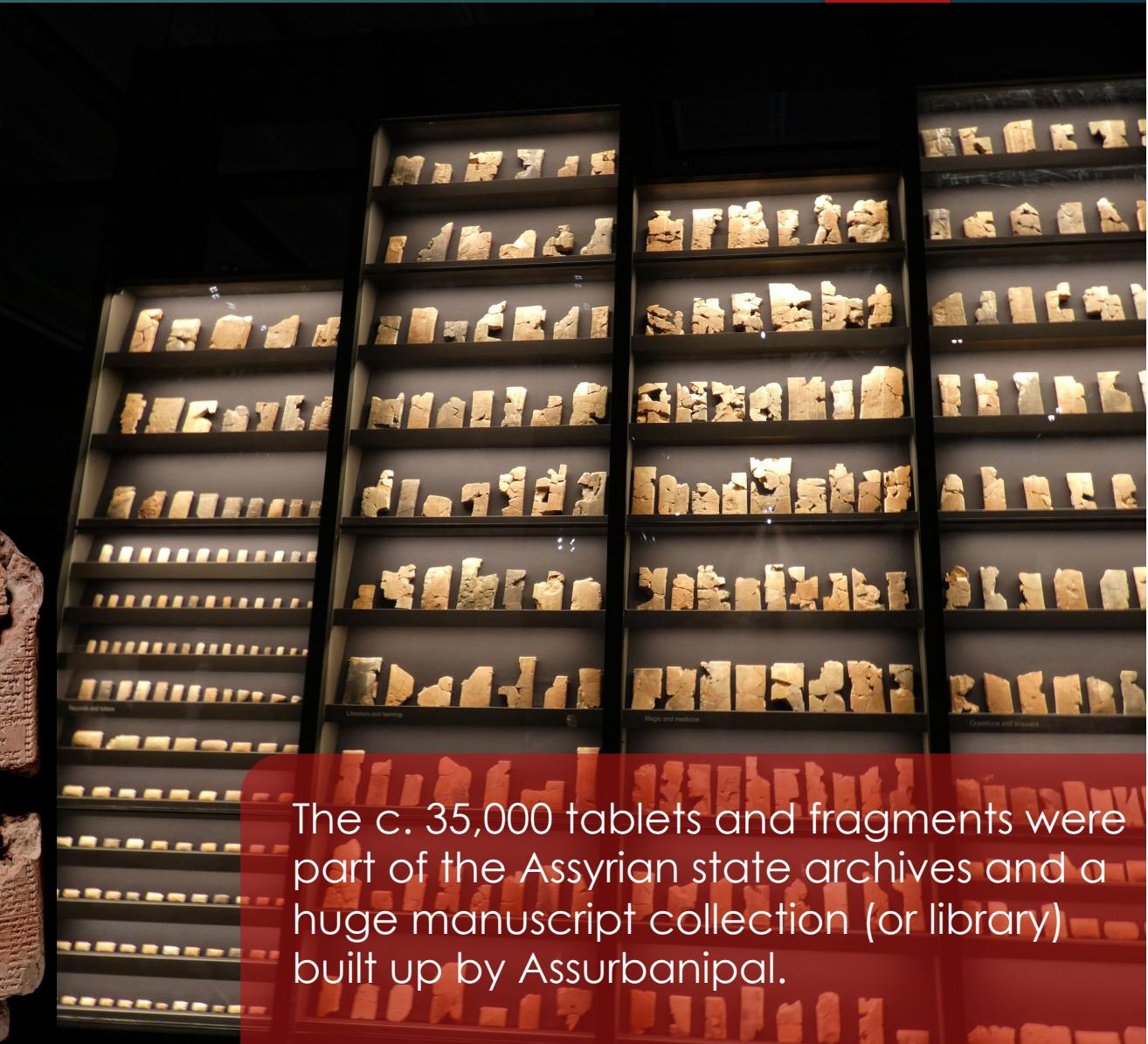
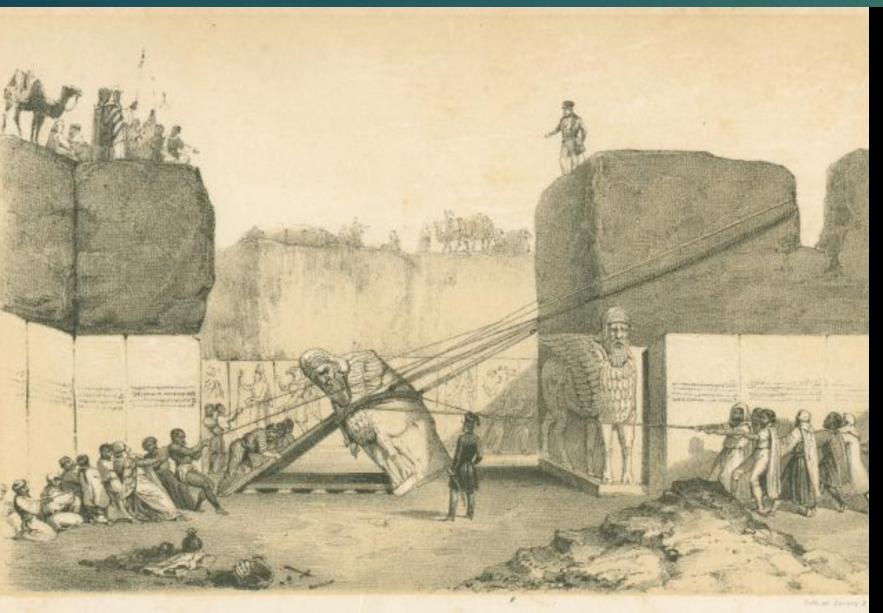
Huge amounts of textual sources derived from excavations in the mid-19th century, particularly in Nineveh.



Decipherment

MESOPOTAMIAN CUNEIFORM

Nineveh, the last capital of the Assyrian kings (opposite Mosul, Iraq) yielded thousands of tablets. Austen Henry Layard started excavating there in 1849.



The c. 35,000 tablets and fragments were part of the Assyrian state archives and a huge manuscript collection (or library) built up by Assurbanipal.

Decipherment

MESOPOTAMIAN CUNEIFORM

The king's command to Shadûnu: (...) The day you read this tablet, take in your company Shumaya (...) and the scholars of Borsippa whom you know, and collect whatever tablets are in their houses, and whatever tablets are kept in the Ezida-temple. Search out for me:

(list of texts)

And any texts that might be needed in the palace, as many as there are, also rare tablets that are known to you do not exist in Assyria and send them to me.

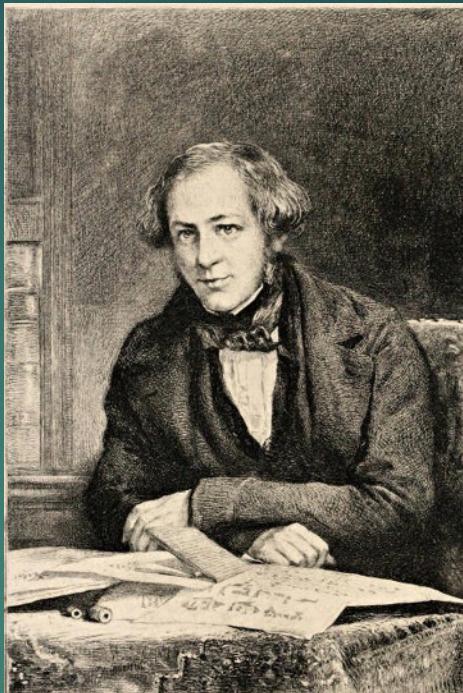


The c. 35,000 tablets and fragments were part of the Assyrian state archives and a huge manuscript collection (or library) built up by Assurbanipal (r. 669–631 BCE).

Decipherment MESOPOTAMIAN CUNEIFORM



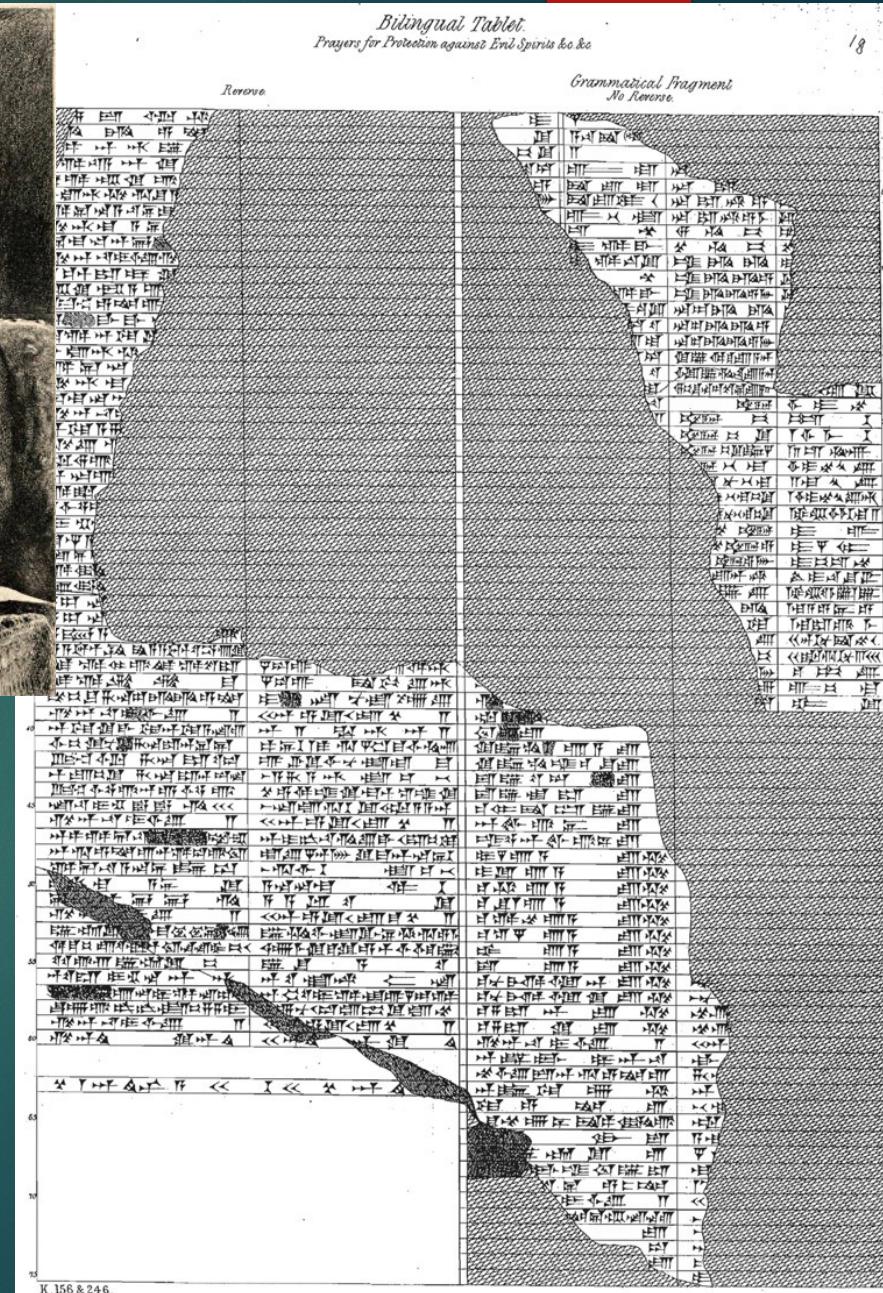
K 156 + K 246



Henry Rawlinson

Publication of important text finds from Nineveh in five volumes by Rawlinson.

Rawlinson, H.C., *The Cuneiform Inscriptions of Western Asia, Vol. II: A Selection from the Miscellaneous Inscriptions of Assyria* (1866)

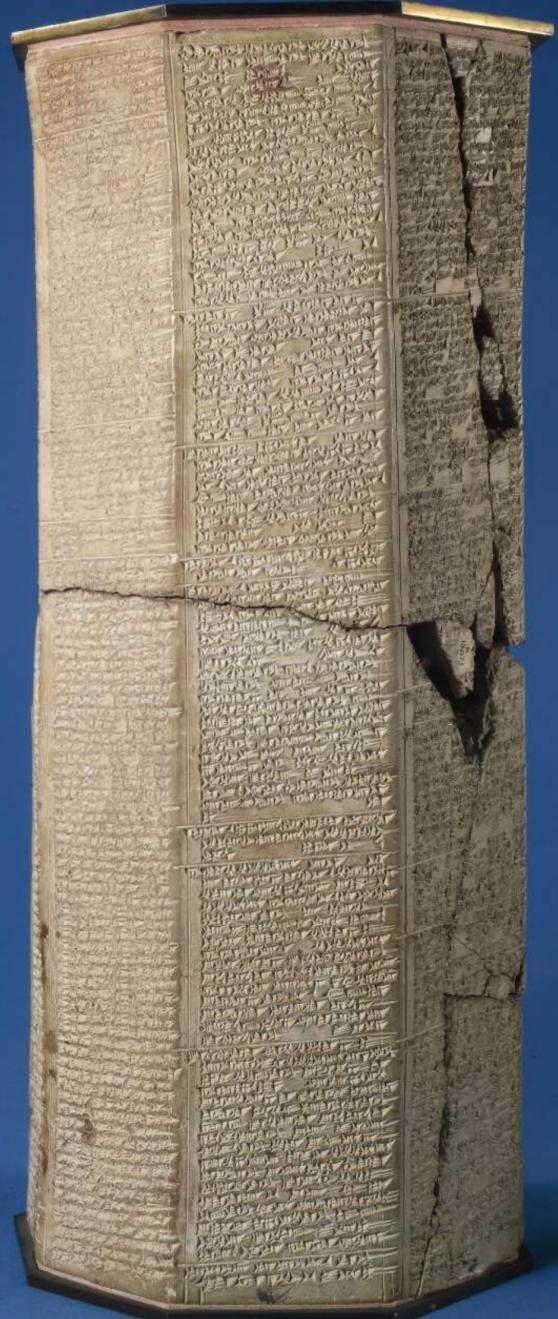


DECIPHERMENT

Mesopotamian Cuneiform

- ▶ 1850, Rawlinson published his *Commentary on the Cuneiform Inscriptions of Babylonia and Assyria*.
- ▶ 1855, Fox Talbot (Cambridge) proposed that independent translations should be made by different scholars:
 - ▶ Henry Rawlinson
 - ▶ Fox Talbot
 - ▶ Edward Hincks, an Irish clergyman
 - ▶ Jules Oppert
- ▶ The report and the four translations were published in 1857. They widely coincided.

Proof text, a 13th century royal inscription



Decipherment

MESOPOTAMIAN CUNEIFORM

- ▶ **Edward Hincks** (1792–1866) was an Irish clergyman.
- ▶ In 1847 he realized that syllabic spellings are found in Assyrian and Babylonian texts.
- ▶ After the discoveries in Nineveh, Hincks was hired by the British Museum, where he identified some syllabary tablets.



DECIPHERMENT

NEXT STEPS



S^a, 2nd mill.

BI	<i>bi-i</i>	BI	<i>ka-a-šu</i>
BI	<i>ka-aš₂</i>	BI	<i>ka-a-šu</i>
NI	<i>ne₂-e</i>	NI	<i>ia-u₂</i>
NI	<i>za-al</i>	NI	<i>ia-u₂</i>
NI	<i>i-li</i>	NI	<i>ia-u₂</i>
NI.NI	<i>i-li</i>	NI.NI	<i>i-min-na-bi</i>
BU	<i>bu-u₂</i>	BU	<i>se-e-ru</i>
BU	<i>si-ir</i>	BU	<i>se-e-ru</i>
SU ₃	<i>SU-U₂</i>	SU ₃	<i>se-er-gu-nu-U</i>
KU	<i>ku-u₂</i>	KU	<i>tu-kul-lu₄</i>
KU	<i>še-e</i>	KU	<i>tu-kul-lu₄</i>
KU	<i>zi-i</i>	KU	<i>tu-kul-lu₄</i>

...

S^a, 1st mill.



DECIPHERMENT

NEXT STEPS



YBC 2176

Syllabaries

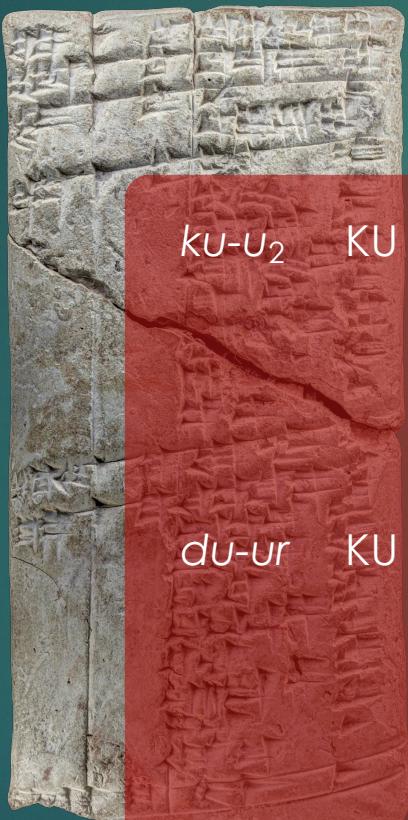
(second half of first
millennium BCE)



BM 38592+

DECIPHERMENT

NEXT STEPS



Syllabary (c. 1900–1600 BCE; YBC 7158)

Syllabaries such as *Ea* provide sign values and Akkadian translations to Sumerian logograms.

na-du-u₂-um (The sign) KU (read) /ku/ (means) “to lay down”

ta-ra-kum ... (it also means) “to beat”

ša-la-lum ... (it also means) “to lie (down)”

...

iš₆-du-um (The sign) KU (read) /dur/ (means) “foundation”

ša-ap-lu-um ... (it also means) “underside”

ki-is-ki-ir-rum ... (it also means) a wooden board

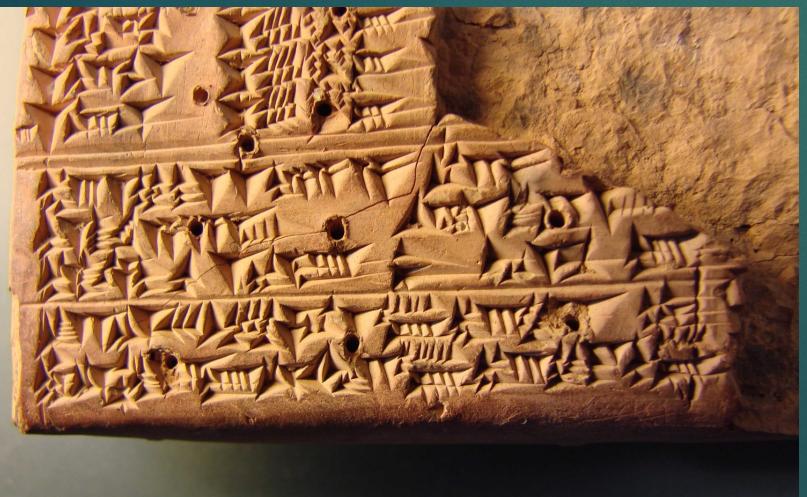
ša-ra-tum ...

šu-bu-rum ...

DECIPHERMENT

SUMERIAN

Together with other lexical texts, vocabularies and grammatical lists, syllabaries provide the backbone to understand the **Sumerian** language.

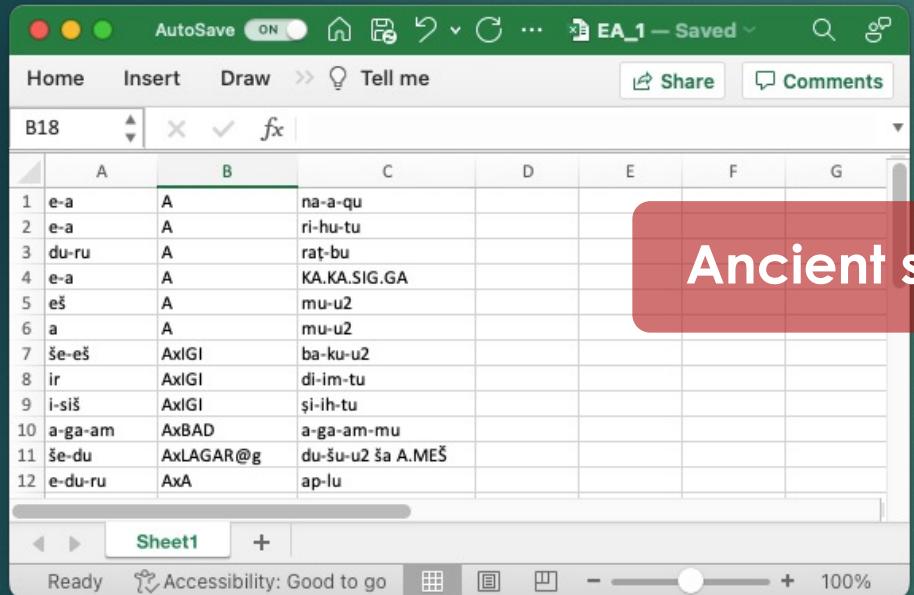


*First tablet of (the series)
Ea : A : nāqu, an old
Aa-series
(13th cent. BCE)*



DECIPHERMENT

SUMERIAN



A screenshot of a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet titled "EA_1 — Saved". The data is organized into columns A, B, and C. Column A contains Sumerian signs, column B contains their phonetic values, and column C contains their meanings. The data is as follows:

	A	B	C
1	e-a	A	na-a-qu
2	e-a	A	ri-hu-tu
3	du-rū	A	rat-bu
4	e-a	A	KA.KA.SIG.GA
5	eš	A	mu-u2
6	a	A	mu-u2
7	še-eš	AxI GI	ba-ku-u2
8	ir	AxI GI	di-im-tu
9	i-siš	AxI GI	ší-ih-tu
10	a-ga-am	AxBAD	a-ga-am-mu
11	še-du	AxLAGAR@g	du-šu-u2 ša A.MEŠ
12	e-du-rū	AxA	ap-lu

Ancient spreadsheets

The sign A read /ea/ means “to cry out.”

The sign A read /ea/ means “progeny.”

The sign A read /duru/ means “damp.”

...



DECIPHERMENT

SUMERIAN

The systematic translation of Sumerian terms and phrases into Akkadian helped to understand Sumerian texts (economic and legal texts, literature, royal inscriptions, etc.)

Sumerian	Akkadian	
niĝ ₂ -gur ₁₁	ma-ak-ku-ru-um	Property
niĝ ₂ -gur ₁₁ lugal	ma-ak-ku-ur šar-r[i-im]	Royal property
an-ku ₄ -ku ₄ nu-si-si	i-ru-um-ma u ₂ -ul i-m[a-al-li]	It entered, but did not fill up.
ab-ta-e ₃ -a nu-silig-ge	u ₂ -ši-ma u ₂ -ul i-k[a-ad]	It goes out, but does not run out.
niĝ ₂ -erim ₂	ra-an-gu-[um]	wicked thing
niĝ ₂ -a ₂ -zi	ši-i-nu-[um]	violence
niĝ ₂ -a ₂ -tak ₄ -a	te-qi ₂ -tum	complaint
niĝ ₂ -šu-tak ₄ -a	šu-bu-u ₂ -ul-tum	gift
niĝ ₂ -gig	ik-ki-bu-um	abomination
niĝ ₂ -al-di	e-ri-iš-tum	request

Six-sided prism with bilingual version (c. 1900–1600 BCE; YBC 13524)



DECIPHERMENT

SUMERIAN

Late commentaries (second half of first millennium BCE) often apply the information gathered from syllabaries, lexical texts, and other bilingual sources to explain (difficult) words and passages in scholarly texts.

aš₂

AŠ

a-ka-lu x x x x x x x x [
ši-bit-tu₄ : MIN : a-na ša-ba-tu₄ :: ŠE [...]
: MIN : pu-uš-qu : dan-na-tu₄ :: si-in-n[a-tu₄ ...]
si-in-na-tu₄ ša₂ i-na ap-pu a-šu-šu₂ la dam-[qat : ...]
šu-nu ha-an-tu₄^{tu} : uš : aš : eš : šu-nu ha-an-[tu ...]
en-na-bi-še₃ mu-ur₃^{ur}-bi i-bi₂^{bi} nu-du₃^{du}-du₃ x [...]
a-di-in-na gu-šu-ru-šu₂ qu-ut-ru la i-mah-ha-r[u ...]
e-de-du : MIN : ša-pa-ru <:> :: e-di-iši-ši-in : MIN : e-[...]
e-di-iš-šu : aš^{as2} mu-lu al-di-di aš mu-lu al-di-[di ...]
e-di-iši-šu₂ i-da-a-lu₄ e-diš-ši-šu₂ i-da-a-l[u₄ ...]

aš mu-lu al-di-di e-diš-ši-šu₂ i-dal e-diš-ši-šu₂ i-dal aš mu-lu al-di-di

Bilingual Lamentation (MLC 1979)

aš₂-gig-ga KA-a-bi nu-sig₅-ga

še-en-ni-tu₄ ša₂ ina ap-pi a-šu-šu₂ la dam-qu

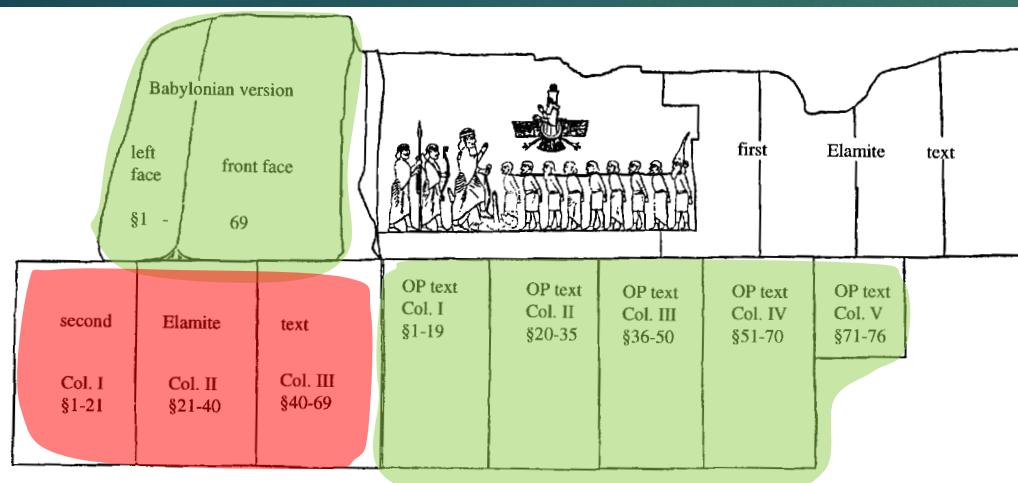
Lugal-e VI, 33 (AO 4135; NB)

Neo-Babylonian
Grammatical Text
(AO 17602)

Decipherment

MESOPOTAMIAN CUNEIFORM

- ▶ The indigenous Elamite language was written with a cuneiform script that was imported from Mesopotamia in the late third millennium BCE and developed further.
- ▶ Achaemenid Elamite cuneiform was a **variation** of the Mesopotamian cuneiform script.



Gold foundation
tablet of Darius (r.
522–486 BCE)



Decipherment

MESOPOTAMIAN CUNEIFORM

- ▶ Mesopotamian cuneiform spread to all areas in Western Asia and was used for many different languages: Sumerian, Akkadian, Elamite, Hittite, Hurrian, Urartian, Ugaritic, Egyptian, ...



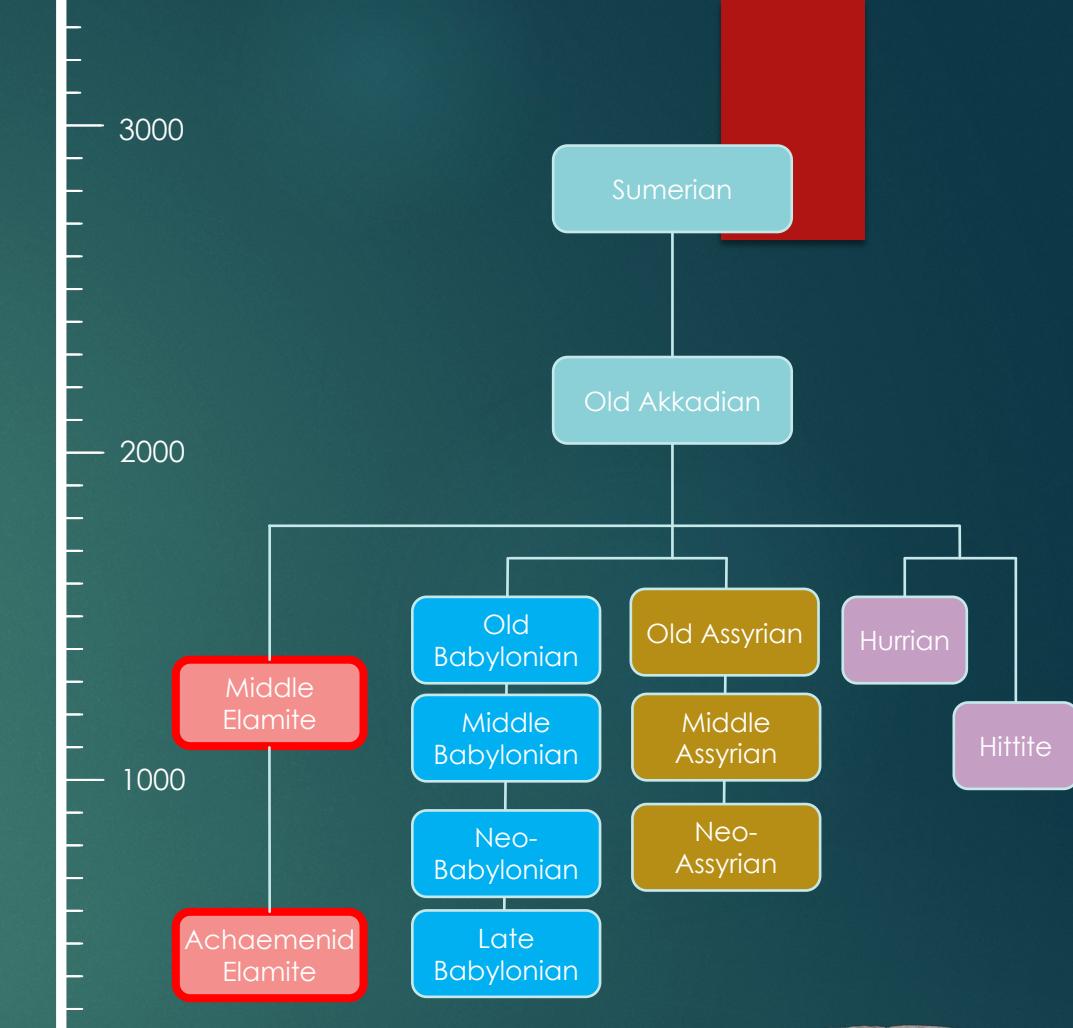
Old Assyrian
letter (c. 1950
BCE)



Old Babylonian letter
(c. 1900–1600 BCE)



Middle Elamite brick (Susa)



Decipherment

MESOPOTAMIAN CUNEIFORM

Similar to Mesopotamian cuneiform, Elamite cuneiform uses different types of characters

- ▶ Syllabic signs
- ▶ Logograms
- ▶ Determinatives
- ▶ Numerals

Elamite uses less signs than Mesopotamian cuneiform:
100–140 signs



DECIPHERMENT

ELAMITE

Elamite economic text, c. 4th cent. BCE

(Amount of) flour, supplied by Parnuma: this (flour) was delivered as rations for one month. Fifteenth year, first(?) month. This (flour) is for Assyrians and Egyptians. Kuyarash has delivered this (flour as) rations to Harkipi, the scribe of the Egyptians. (...)



Decipherment

ELAMITE

Elamite as source for *Abacadabra* in
magical spells from Mesopotamia

zizzipik / ilala zak

u šuhriša ap / muškurbī

ip tete / kiririša ap

naprišaša / kiriri šini tila

pili hih pir / narudi pili

innan duhuduš

Incantation formula: It is an
incantation for a woman in labor.

Magical spell (c.
1900–1600 BCE;
YBC 5624)



1 cm
|—————|

YALE BABYLONIAN COLLECTION



Decipherment

ELAMITE

Middle Elamite (c. 1500–1000 BCE)

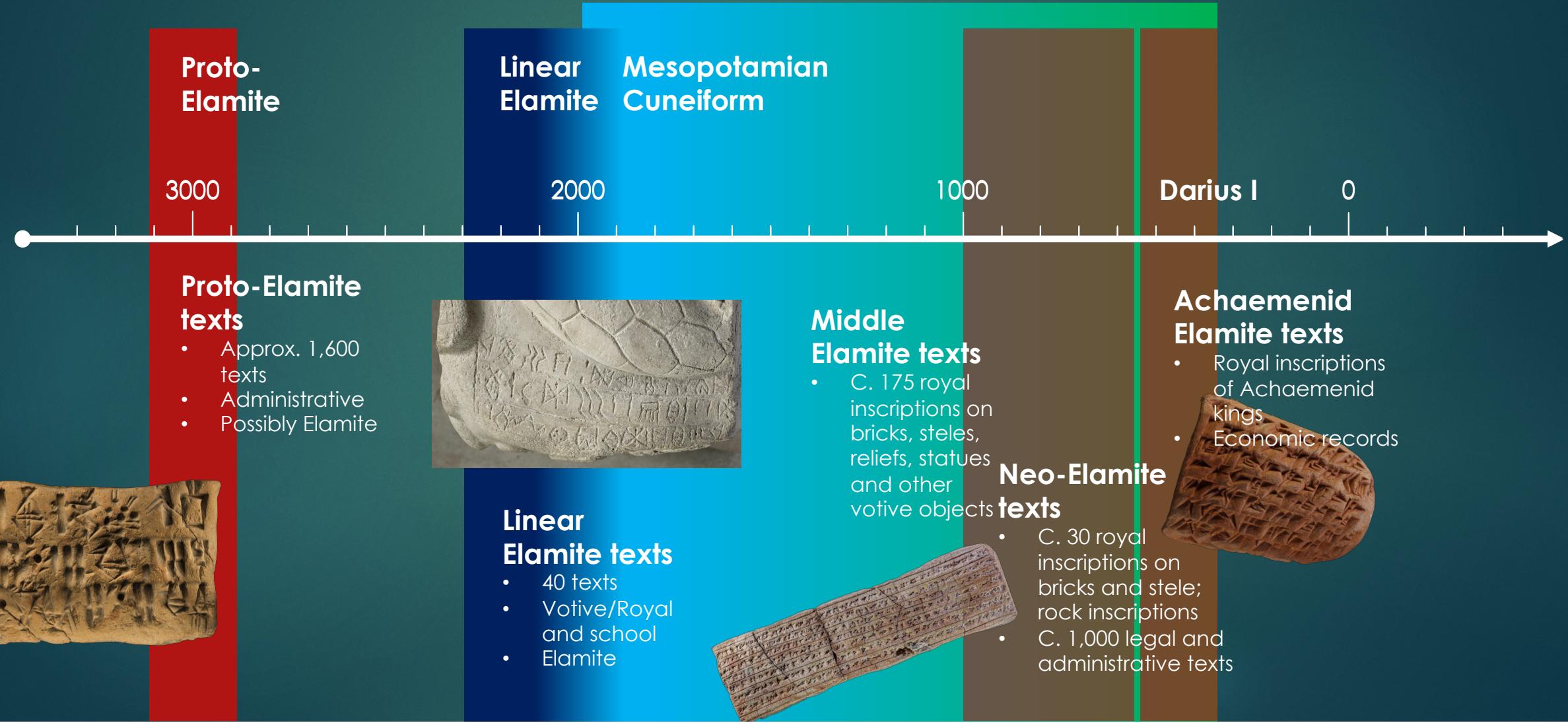
- ▶ Approx. 180 royal inscriptions; most on building material

I, Shilhak-Inshushinak, son of Shutruk-Nahhunte, beloved servant of (goddess) Kiririsha and of Inshushinak, king of Anshan and Susa:
Humbanumena has built the temple of Kiririsha-of-Liyan with fired bricks, and as it was in danger of ruin, I restored it, in baked restoration bricks I recreated it. (...)



Middle Elamite bricks (Susa)

IRAN



IRAN

BEFORE CUNEIFORM

► Proto-Elamite (c. 3100–2900 BCE)

- ▶ Earliest, undeciphered writing in Iran
- ▶ Approx. 1,700 texts (1,600 from Susa alone), all economic accounts
- ▶ Roughly contemporary with earliest texts from Mesopotamia and sharing a few characteristics with Proto-Cuneiform (e.g., numerical systems)
- ▶ Each sign is referred to by their number in the current sign list M = Meriggi, *La scrittura proto-elamica*, 1974

[...] M263_{b1} 3(N₁)
M387 M263_{b1} 1(N₁)



Economic text from Susa (Sb 22285)

IRAN

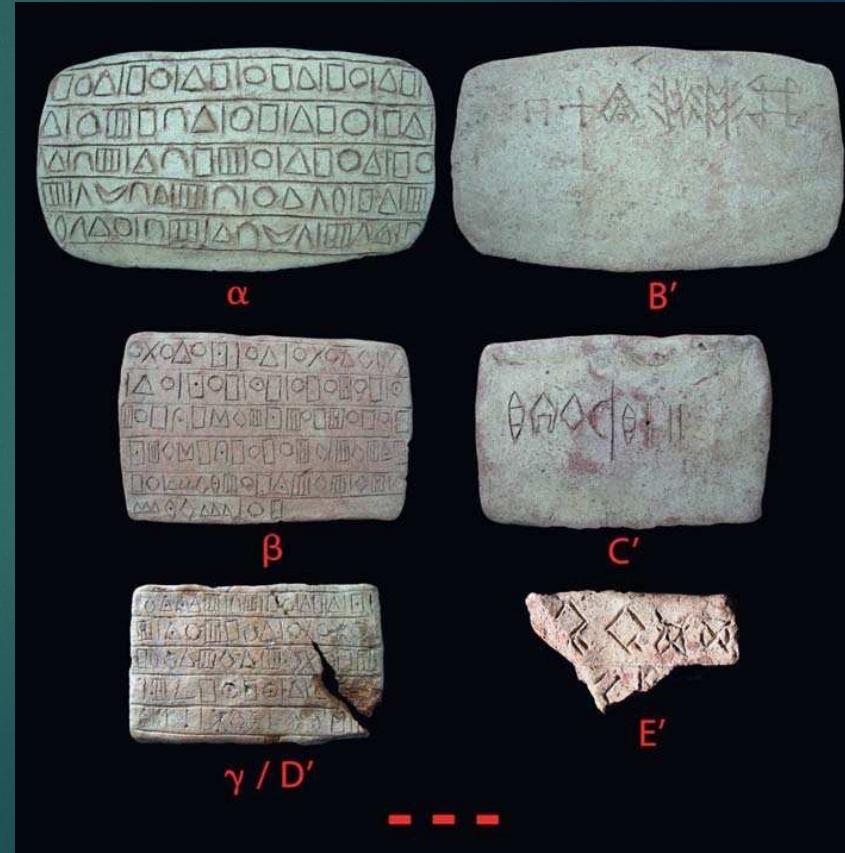
Linear Elamite

- ▶ Around 2300–2200 BCE, introduction of cuneiform script in Elam.
- ▶ Roughly contemporary appear a few votive objects with a script generally referred to as Linear Elamite. One inscription is directly next to an Akkadian inscription and **was** therefore considered to be a rendition of the Akkadian text.
- ▶ Whether or not Linear Elamite is a late version of Proto-Elamite or took elements from Proto-Elamite is still debated.



Iran, c. 2300–1880

- ▶ To date (2021) 40 inscriptions in Linear Elamite are known.
- ▶ Inscriptions appear mostly on votive objects made of stone and metal.
- ▶ The majority of provenanced inscriptions originates from Susa. Other places are Konar Sandal (east Iran) and Kam-Firuz (central Iran / Fars).
- ▶ Several clay tablets preserve Linear Elamite inscriptions. Examples from Konar Sandal preserve Linear Elamite on one side and an unknown writing system (called “Geometric”) on the other.

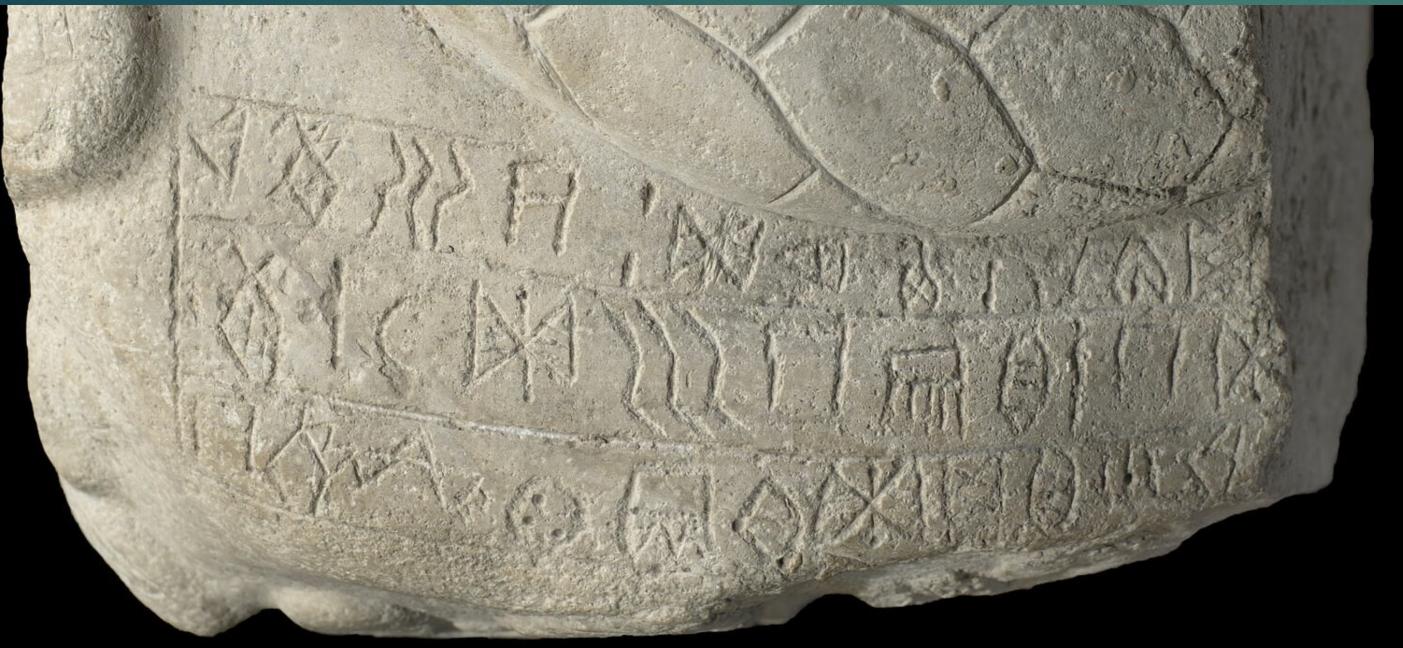


Tablets from Konar Sandal

DECIPHERMENT

LINEAR ELAMITE

- F. Dessel, K. Tabibzadeh, M. Kervran, G. P. Basello, G. Marchesi (2022): "The Decipherment of Linear Elamite Writing," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 112: 11–60.



Abhandlung

François Dessel, Kambiz Tabibzadeh, Matthieu Kervran, Gian Pietro Basello, and Gianni Marchesi*

The Decipherment of Linear Elamite Writing

<https://doi.org/10.1515/za-2022-0003>

Abstract: Linear Elamite writing was used in southern Iran in the late 3rd/early 2nd millennium BCE (ca. 2300–1880 BCE). First discovered during the French excavations at Susa from 1903 onwards, it has so far resisted decipherment. The publication of eight inscribed silver beakers in 2018 provided the materials and the starting point for a new attempt; its results are presented in this paper. A full description and analysis of Linear Elamite of writing, employed for recording the Elamite language, is given here for the first time, together with a discussion of Elamite phonology and the biscriptuality that characterizes this language in its earliest documented phase.

Dedicated to Françoise Grillot and François Vallat, and to the memory of Vincent Scheil, Ferdinand Bork, Carl Frank, Walther Hinz, Piero Meriggi, and Marie-Joseph Steve, great pioneers who paved the way.

"Provided sufficient text is available, a phonetic writing can and ultimately must be deciphered if the underlying language is known" (Gelb 1975, 96).

1 Introduction

In 1903, French excavators working in the Acropolis mound of Susa found inscriptions attesting to a new writing system (Scheil 1905), which for a long time was assimilated to that of the so-called 'Proto-Elamite' tablets, as a lapidary version of it (see, e.g., de Mecquenem 1956, 200; and Gelb 1963, 89: "a more developed form of Pro-

to-Elamite writing") until, in the early sixties, it was interpreted as an independent script and renamed *elamische Strichschrift* (Hinz 1962²) or, in English, *Linear Elamite* (Hinz 1975; henceforth abbreviated as LE when used adjectively, while PE stands for Proto-Elamite). Used in southern Iran between ca. 2300 and 1880 BCE (for the locations of the sites mentioned in this study, see Fig. 1), despite several decipherment attempts, Linear Elamite remained substantially undeciphered until recently (see Fig. 2).² Here is a summary of the results obtained in previous studies and proven correct by our decipherment (for the numbers that identify the various glyphs, see Fig. 3a).

Bork (1905, 328; 1924), studying inscription A,³ correctly identified the phonemic values *ši* (glyph 83), *še* (glyphs 87f.), *na* (169), and *k* (70, read by Bork as "(a)k"). Moreover, he came very close to establishing the correct readings of the glyphs 137f. ("en" = *ni*), 201 ("šu" = *su*), and 2f. ("ke" = *ki*).

Frank (1912, 20; 1923) came close to identifying two additional values — *n* and *š* — attributing the reading "in"

Article note: Abbreviations are those of the Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie (<https://rla.badw.de/realexikon/abkuerzungslisten.html>; note especially EKI = König 1965; and EIW = Hinz/Koch 1987), to which the siglum TZ, for the texts from Choga Zanbil published by Steve (1967), must be added.

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Kambiz Tabibzadeh, Eastern Kentucky University

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Gian Pietro Basello, 'L'Orientale' University of Naples

Gianni Marchesi, University of Bologna

[The order reflects the moment when each author got engaged in the project: F. Dessel and K. Tabibzadeh: end of 2018; M. Kervran: end of 2019; G. P. Basello: beginning of 2020; G. Marchesi: beginning of 2021.]

¹ Note that Bork (1924) already used the term *Strichschrift* to refer to this writing.

² On Linear Elamite, see, most recently, Dessel (2012, 92–127; 2018a). See also Hinz 1962; 1969; 1971; 1975; Meriggi 1971; Vallat 1986; André/Salvini 1989; Salvini 1998; and Steve 2000.

³ LE inscriptions are traditionally identified by individual letters of the alphabet. It was Scheil (1905) who started to label the inscriptions with Latin letters following the alphabetical order and this practice has continued to this day.

DECIPHERMENT

LINEAR ELAMITE

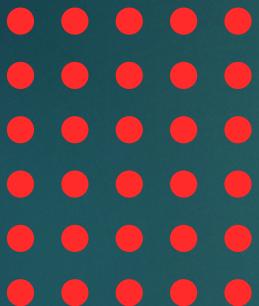
- ▶ The sign inventory consists of c. 350 signs. In total, the current corpus preserves 1890 sign occurrences.



WRITING SYSTEMS

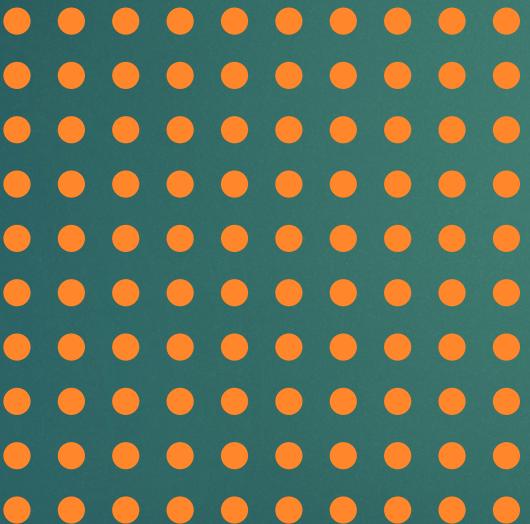
TYPES

Alphabet /
Abjad



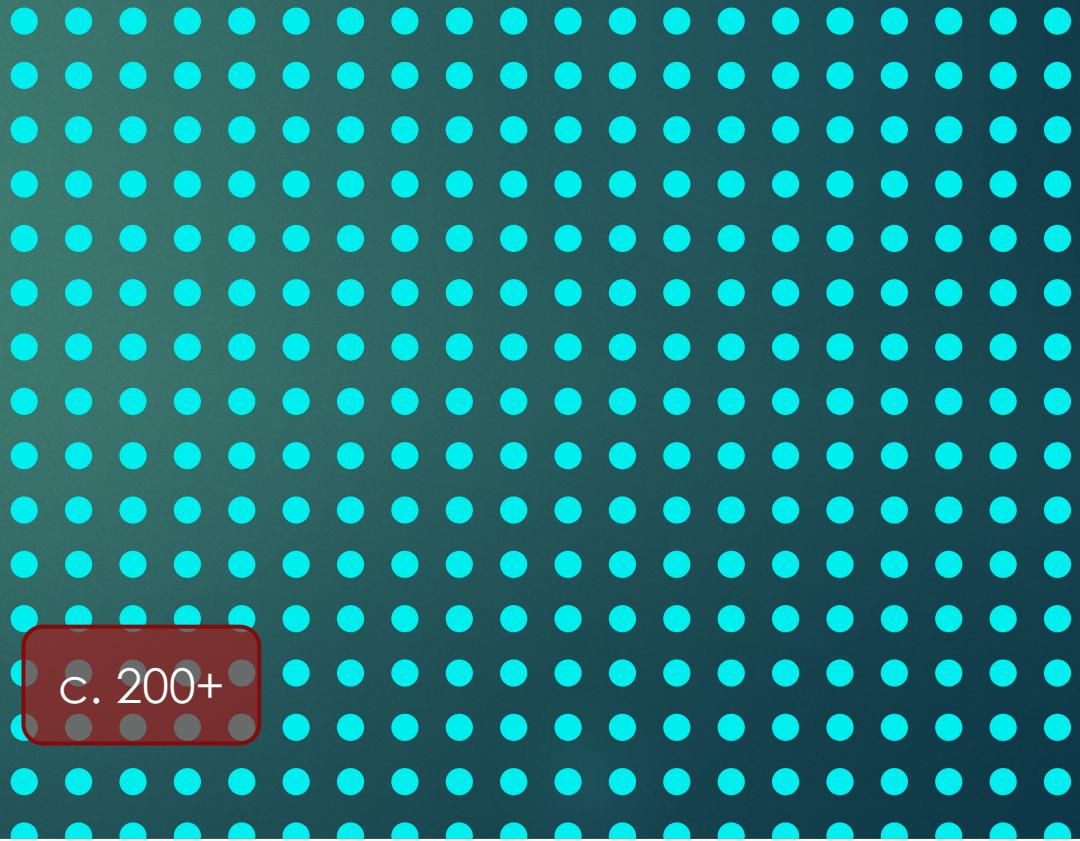
c. 30

Syllabary /
Abugida



c. 100

Logosyllabary



c. 200+

DECIPHERMENT

LINEAR ELAMITE

Previous hurdles for the decipherment

- ▶ Small corpus (roughly 40 texts)
- ▶ On four objects, the Linear Elamite text accompanies an Akkadian inscription.
- ▶ Until 2018, only 12 signs could be correctly identified, i.e., they could be read phonetically.
- ▶ Half of the c. 350 glyphs are only attested once.



DECIPHERMENT

LINEAR ELAMITE

Akkadian inscription

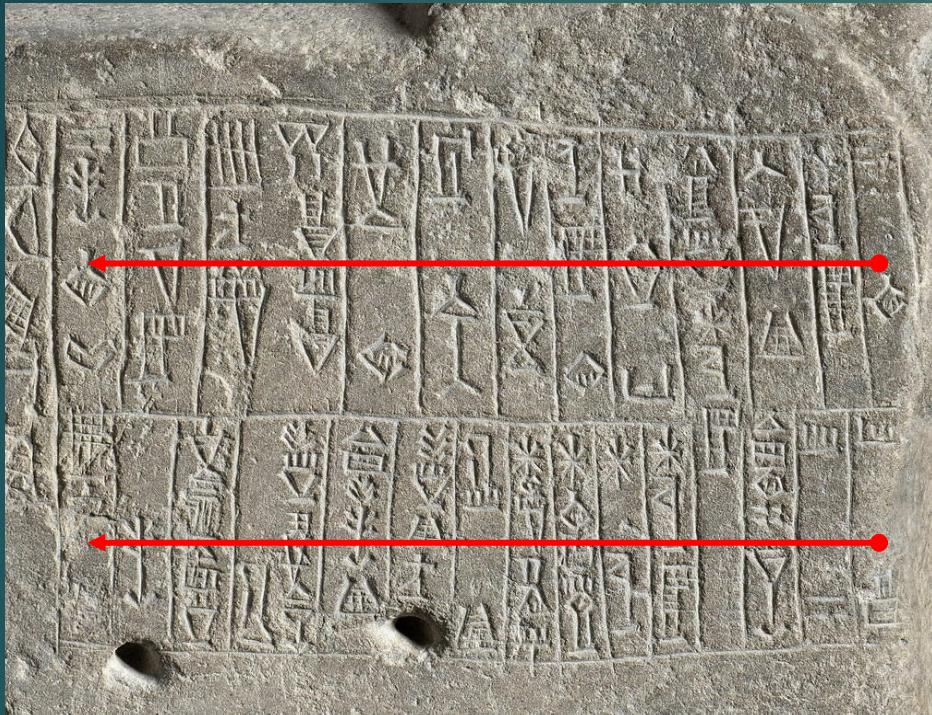
► For Inshushinak, his lord, Puzur-Sushinak, the governor of Susa, the prefect of the land Elam, son of Shimpi-ishuk, dedicated (this) foundation deposit (lit. copper peg made of cedar). Whoever removes this inscription, Ishtar, Narunte and Nergal may tear out his roots (...)

Linear Elamite inscription



DECIPHERMENT

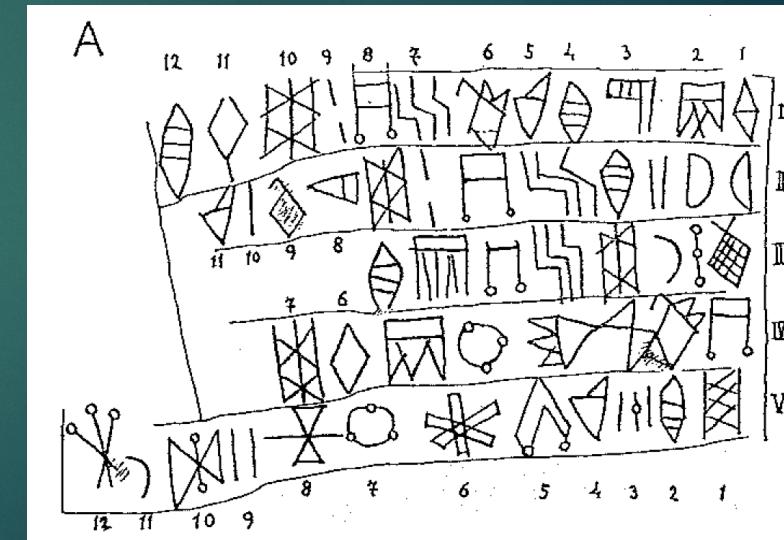
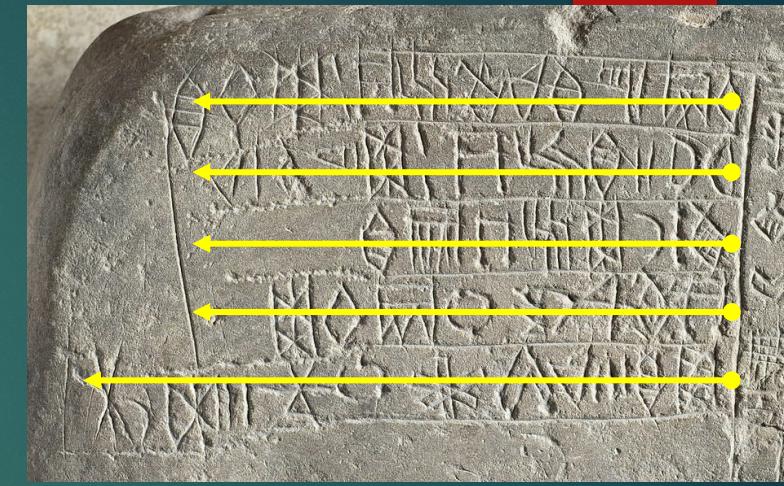
LINEAR ELAMITE



Akkadian inscription

(original orientation of cuneiform)

Col. i Col. ii



Linear Elamite inscription

DECIPHERMENT

LINEAR ELAMITE

Contemporary Elamite texts written in cuneiform

- ▶ Currently nine sources are known; all but one are metal beakers.
- ▶ These texts contain personal, divine, and geographical names as well as titles and epithets, which served as basis for the decipherment of Linear Elamite.
- ▶ This led to the identification of 72 Linear Elamite signs corresponding to 96 % of the 1890 sign occurrences of the corpus.

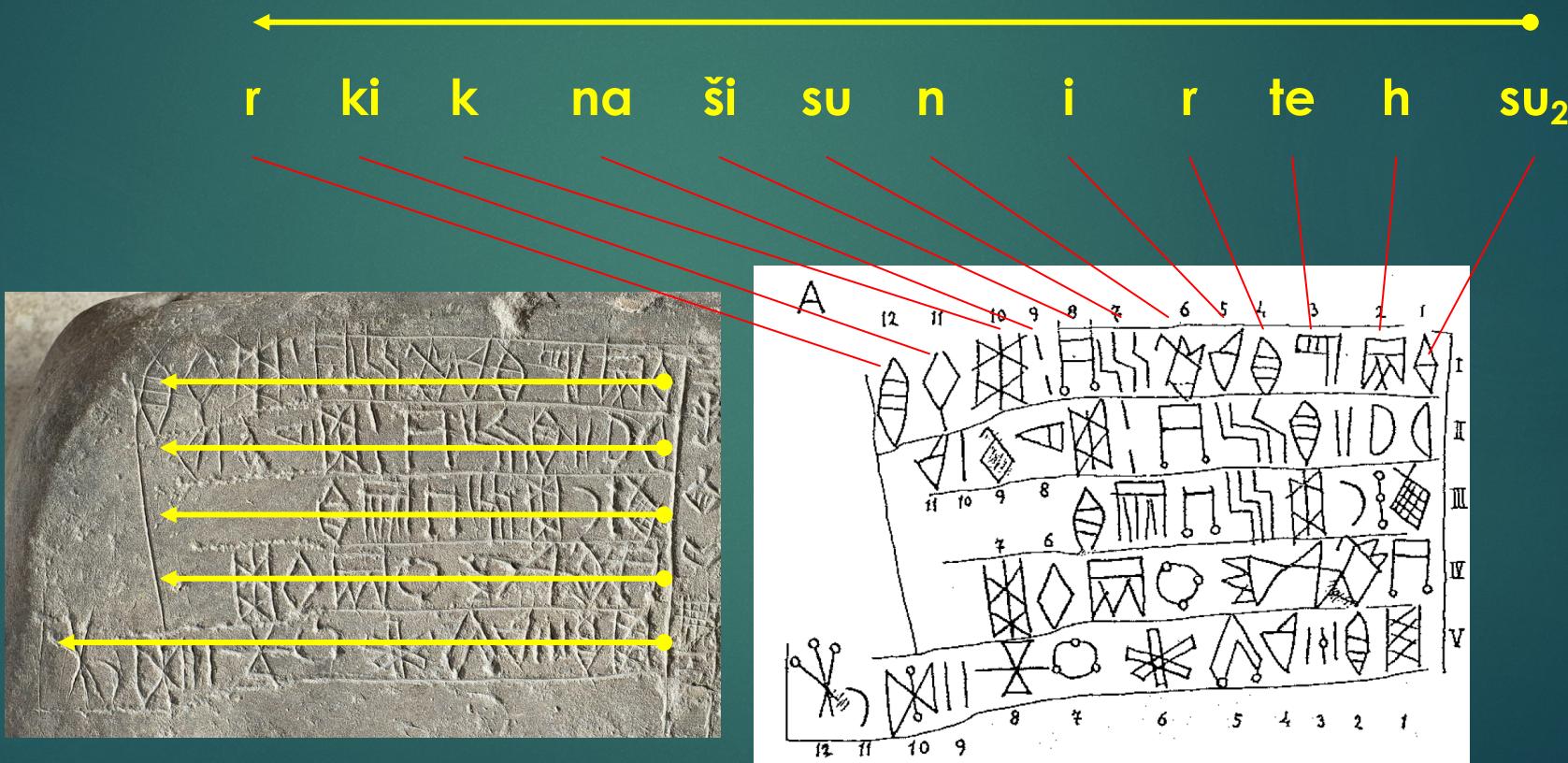


DECIPHERMENT

LINEAR ELAMITE

su_2 -*h-te-r i-n-su-ši-na-k-ki-r*

"altar of Insushinak"



Linear Elamite inscription

CUNEIFORM

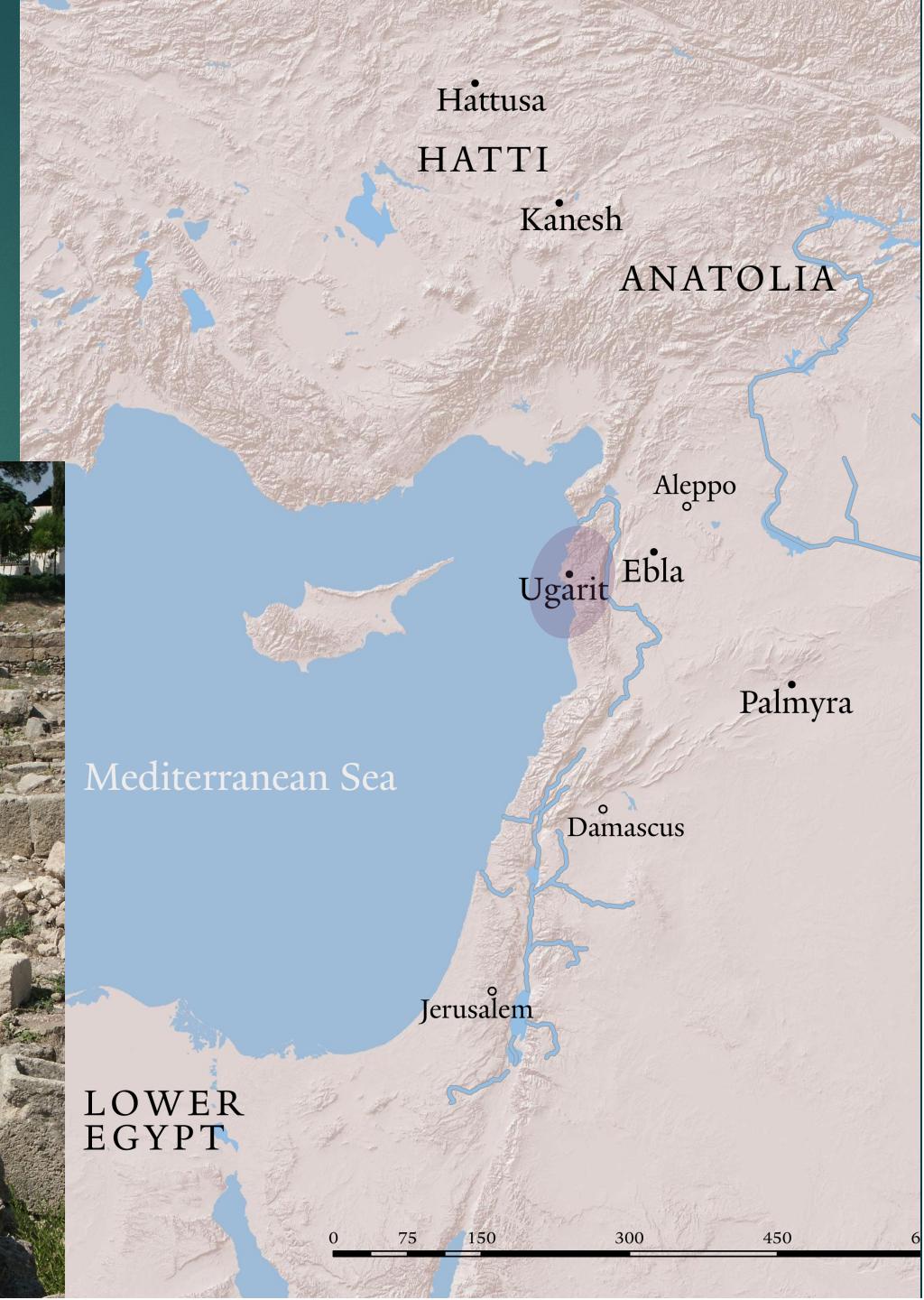
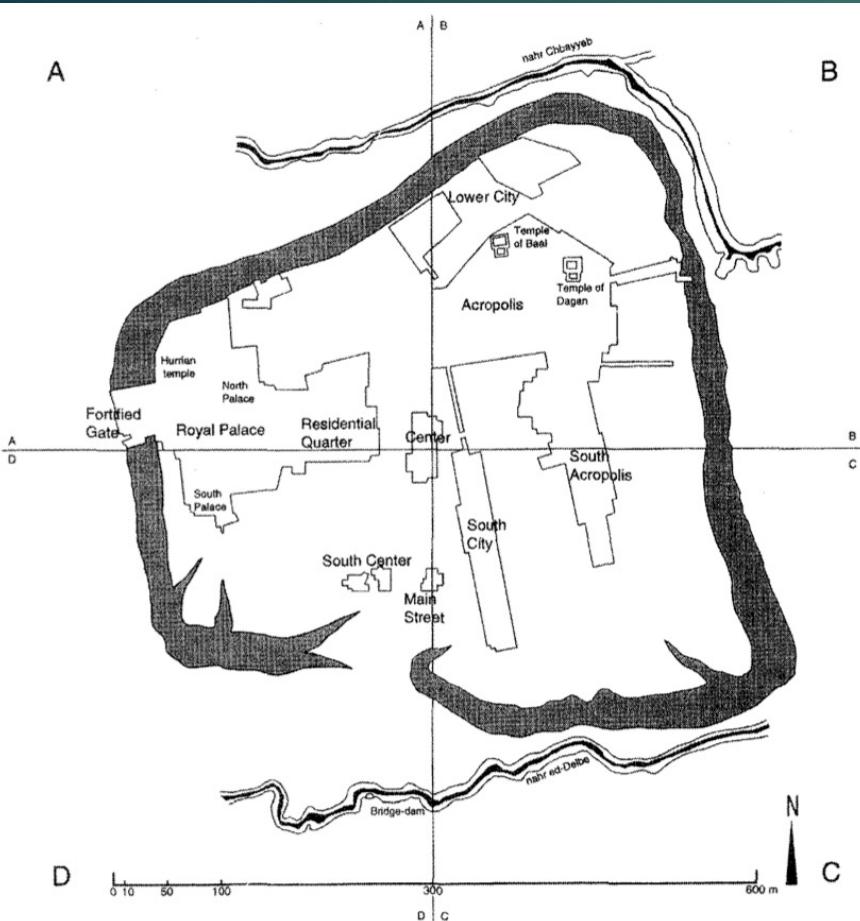
- ▶ The term “cuneiform” (< Latin *cuneus*, “wedge”) is used for different scripts:
 - ▶ Mesopotamian cuneiform (logosyllabary)
 - ▶ **Ugaritic cuneiform** (abjad)
 - ▶ used for West Semitic Ugaritic; 1300–1190 BCE
 - ▶ Old Persian cuneiform (semi-alphabetic)



DECIPHERMENT

UGARITIC CUNEIFORM

Ugarit, mod. Ras Shamra



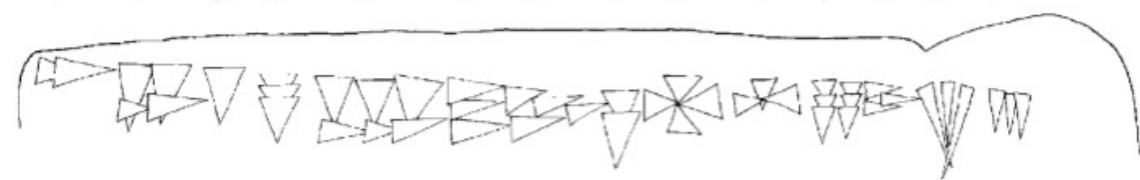
DECIPHERMENT

UGARITIC CUNEIFORM

- ▶ 1948, discovery of first “abecedary” tablet.
- ▶ confirmed the number of signs used
- ▶ demonstrated close relationship to linear writing (Phoenician)



Sign Number:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Hebrew Alphabet:	ב	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ת	י	ק	ל		
Transcription:	b	b	g	ḥ	d	h	w	z	t	y	k	š	l	



Sign Number:	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
Hebrew Alphabet:	מ	נ	ס	ׁ	ׁ	ׁ	ׁ	ׁ	ׁ	ׁ	ׁ
Transcription:	m	n	s	‘	‘	‘	‘	‘	‘	‘	‘



Sign Number:	26	27	28	29	30
Hebrew Alphabet:	ת		ׁ	ׁ	
Transcription:	ṭ		‘	‘	



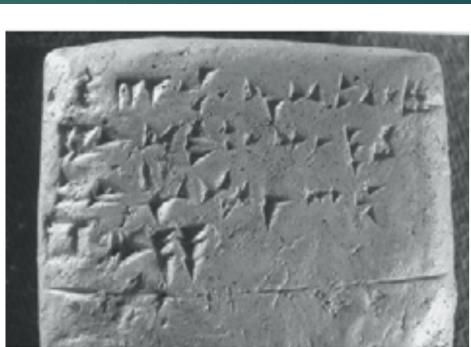
DECIPHERMENT

UGARITIC CUNEIFORM

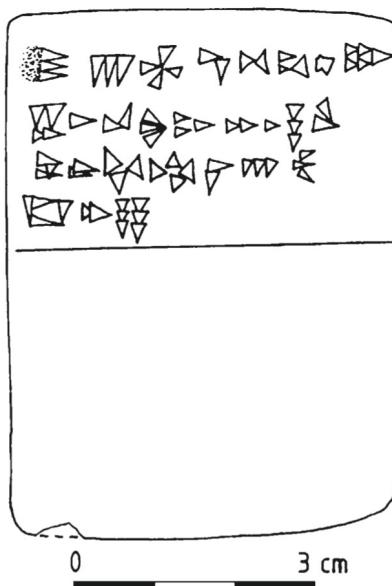
- ▶ Long alphabet (abjad)
 - ▶ used for most Ugaritic texts
 - ▶ follows the order of Northwest Semitic abjads with some additional signs
- ▶ Short alphabet (abjad)
 - ▶ rarely attested; probably used to write Phoenician
- ▶ South Semitic type abjad



Northwest Semitic	
'	b g d h w z h t y k l m n s c p š q r š t
Ugaritic	
â	b g h d h w z h t y k š l m d n z s c p š q r t g t
î	ú š



1. h l h m q w t r
2. b t d š k n h š
3. s p c d g d g
4. t z y



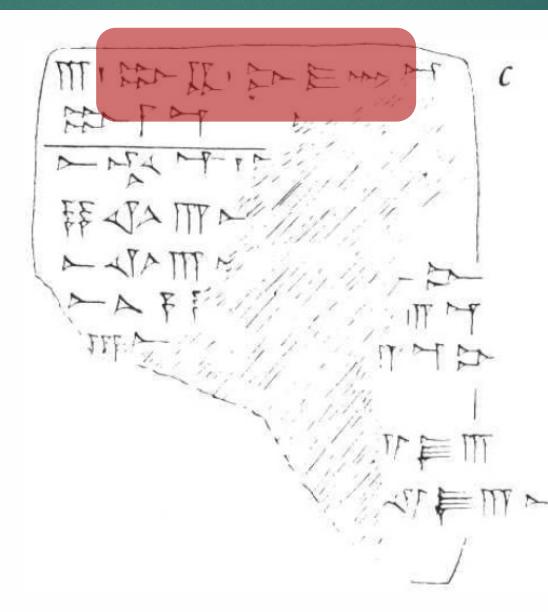
DECIPHERMENT

UGARITIC CUNEIFORM

- ▶ Starting point were a few inscribed bronze axes.
- ▶ It was assumed by Charles Virolleaud that re-occurring sequences of signs identified the owner.
- ▶ The same sequence was found on a clay letter indicating the recipient.



Northwest Semitic	
'	b g d h w z ḥ t y k l m n s c p š q r š t
Ugaritic	
â	b g b d h w z ḥ t y k š l m d n z s c p š q r t g t
î	ú š

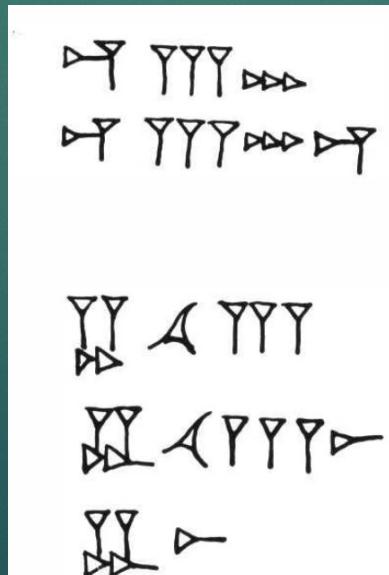


rb khnm (*rabbu kāhinīma*),
“great priest”

DECIPHERMENT

UGARITIC CUNEIFORM

- ▶ Viroleaud assumed that the single letter before the name is *l* corresponding to West Semitic *l*, “for.”
- ▶ Check for other words containing *l*: *mlk*, “king,” *bcl*, Ba’al.



Sign Number:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
Hebrew Alphabet:	א	ב	ג	ה	ד	ח	ו	ז	ה	ת	י	ק	ש	ל
Transcription:	ā	b	g	h	d	h	w	z	h	t	y	k	š	l



Sign Number:	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
Hebrew Alphabet:	מ	ד	נ	ז	ס	כ	פ	ש	ק	ר	שׁ
Transcription:	m	d	n	z	s	c	p	sh	q	r	t



Sign Number:	26	27	28	29	30
Hebrew Alphabet:	ת	ת	י	ע	ׁשׂ
Transcription:	g	t	i	u	sh



mlk, “king”

mlkm, “king”

bcl, “Ba’al”

bcl, “Ba’alat”

bt, “daughter, house”



DECIPHERMENT

UGARITIC CUNEIFORM

- ▶ Three different decipherments of the Ugaritic abjad script in the 1930s:
 - ▶ Charles Virolleaud
 - ▶ Hans Bauer
 - ▶ Édouard Dhorme
- ▶ Final confirmation through texts in Ugaritic script with Ugaritic written in Mesopotamian cuneiform.

School tablet from Ugarit

R ^o	a	a
b	be	
g	ga	
l	la	
d	di	5
h	iu	
w	wa	
z	zi	
k	ku	
t	ti	10
	
V ^o
[p]	[p]u	20
s	sa	
q	qu	
r	ra	
š	ša	25
ḡ	la	
t̄	lu	
i	i	
u	u	
š̄	zu	30

Readings

- ▶ John Baines (2004): “The earliest Egyptian writing: development, context, purpose”. In: S. Houston (ed.): *The First Writing. Script Invention as History and Process* (Cambridge): 150–189.
- ▶ John Darnell (2020): “Origins of Writing in Northeastern Afrika”. In: T. Spear (ed.): *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.594
- ▶ Jerrold S. Cooper (2004): “Babylonian beginnings: the origin of the cuneiform writing system in comparative perspective”. In: S. Houston (ed.): *The First Writing. Script Invention as History and Process* (Cambridge): 71–99.
- ▶ Eckart Frahm & Klaus Wagensonner (2019): “Cuneiform Writing. Origins, History, Decipherment.” In: A. W. Lassen, E. Frahm, & K. Wagensonner (eds.): *Ancient Mesopotamia Speaks. Highlights of the Yale Babylonian Collection* (New Haven): 22–43.