

# Writing and writing materials in the ancient Near East

by Kevin J. Cathcart

It is very appropriate that an address on 'Writing in the ancient Near East' should be given in the Royal Irish Academy, for it was here that many of the fundamental papers by the great Irish Orientalist Edward Hincks (1792-1866)<sup>1</sup> on the elucidation of Egyptian and the decipherment of Old Persian, Elamite, Akkadian and Sumerian were read. These brilliant articles were subsequently published in the Transactions and Proceedings of the Academy.<sup>2</sup>

Edward Hincks is unique in the history of progress in the study of the ancient Near East in that he made major discoveries in both the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs and in Mesopotamian cuneiform.<sup>3</sup> He seems to have become interested in ancient Near Eastern languages when he was a student and fellow at Trinity College, Dublin. While working as an assistant librarian there, he must have become fascinated by the collection of Oriental manuscripts. In 1832 he published a Hebrew Grammar<sup>4</sup> and in 1833 there appeared an article by him on 'The Enchorial Language of Egypt',<sup>5</sup> the first of many excellent articles that were to come from his pen. This particular article on Demotic is remarkable for its grasp of the decipherment of ancient Egyptian and it contains an outline of Demotic. One of the early German Egyptologists, H. Brugsch, held the Irish scholar in very high esteem and considered Hincks the first person to use a correct system of transliteration in Egyptian and to recognize fully the Semitic character of Egyptian grammar. In 1847 Hincks wrote a review of Henry Rawlinson's *The Persian Cuneiform Inscription at Behistun* (1846) and he praised the work very highly.<sup>6</sup> The review revealed Hincks' masterly control of Old Persian. Indeed, on 25th August, 1846, Rawlinson had sent a 'Supplementary Note' to London, where it arrived on the 8th October, setting forth the observation that certain consonants are represented by different signs according to the vowel that followed. But in this he had been anticipated by Hincks, for on the 9th June, 1846, a paper by Hincks was read at the Royal Irish Academy and published later that year in the Transactions of the Academy.<sup>7</sup>

However, it is when one comes to the early stages of the decipherment of Akkadian that pride of place must be given to Hincks. Between 1846 and 1850,

several brilliant papers by him were read before the Royal Irish Academy and subsequently appeared in its publications.<sup>8</sup> Hincks' genius can scarcely be exaggerated. His results show amazing insight and an astonishing linguistic ability. It must be stressed that for most of his life he lived in an isolated rectory with no access to good libraries. True he had his own personal library and was sufficiently well off to purchase certain books. He also received gifts of books and offprints from scholars in England and Europe. He made trips to the British Museum and to conferences and meetings in Britain, and he was an excellent correspondent. Yet it was only with his remarkable mind and talents that he could have unravelled the complexities of the Sumero-Akkadian writing system. Already in the summer of 1846, in a postscript to his paper on the 'First and second Kinds of Persepolitan Writing',<sup>9</sup> he stated that with regard to 'Assyrio-Babylonian' writing, some characters represent syllables and the same sound is represented by two or more characters. He remarked also that no vowel is omitted, there is a greater number of characters, and the language has affinities with the Semitic languages. Towards the end of the same year and at the beginning of 1847, further papers came from his pen. In them he presented a Babylonian syllabary, he had deciphered VC and CV syllables and he had identified determinatives. He had read 'a.na.ku, 'I', it is clearly phonetic.' And so before anyone else he had read an Akkadian word that was not a proper name. One of Hincks' most important articles appeared in 1850, though it had been read to the Royal Irish Academy on 25th June, 1849.<sup>10</sup> In it he was much occupied with the logographic element in Akkadian, explaining the nature of logograms, including composite logograms. He also gave examples of syllables consisting of CVC. Finally, he established once and for all that the characters which are not logograms or determinatives stand for full syllables — no sign represents a simple consonant. Needless to say, the principles set forth by Hincks had to be refined and corrected here and there during the years ahead, and this was accomplished as hundreds of tablets recovered by Botta and Layard from places like Khorsabad, Nimrud and Nineveh were studied and published.

Of course, Hincks was not alone in the investigation of the Akkadian cuneiform writings. Other scholars too were labouring over them and the indefatigable Rawlinson announced progress as early as 1847. But his work was hampered not a little by his adherence to what he called the 'Babylonian alphabet', and it was only a few years later (1851) that he came to accept Hincks' 'syllabism'. J. Oppert in Paris also made progress, but other scholars found it difficult to accept their proposals, and there was particular hostility to the principle of polyphony, that is, the principle that many cuneiform signs can have two or more distinct values. And so it was that in 1857 the Royal Asiatic Society invited Rawlinson, Hincks and Oppert to make independent translations of the inscription of Tiglath Pileser I found by Rassam at Qal'at Sharqāt. W.H. Fox Talbot, better known for his contributions to mathematics and photography, had already submitted a translation. When a committee of the society opened the submissions from the four scholars, it transpired that the translations of Hincks and Rawlinson were the closest; Oppert's was somewhat different, and Fox Talbot's was the weakest, but the four versions had enough points of similarity to convince the committee that the decipherment of the Akkadian cuneiform script was an accomplished fact.<sup>11</sup> It is clear that Hincks, Rawlinson and Oppert were the founders of Assyriology, though the first two, each in his own way, were pre-eminent.

As if the decipherment of Old Persian, Elamite and Akkadian was not enough, Hincks was already concluding in 1850 that though the language of the Assyrians and Babylonians was Semitic, their writing system was not. Rawlinson too about the same time observed this fact, though he incorrectly thought Egypt was the place of origin for the writing system. In any event, these observations were the starting point for the study of the language now called Sumerian. A perusal of the bibliography of Hincks' writings will show that right to the end of his life he laboured in the fields of Assyriology and Egyptology. Specimen chapters of his Assyrian grammar were published during the last months of his life,<sup>12</sup> and he posted the corrected proofs of his last article<sup>13</sup> the day before his death, which took place on the 3rd December, 1866. Our knowledge of the writing systems of the ancient Near East has increased considerably since the days of Edward Hincks. Archaeologists have unearthed vast numbers of texts in the scripts known to Hincks, and the new languages Eblaite and Ugaritic have been deciphered.

It is obvious that writing was essential for the administration and exercise of economic life. Towards the end of the fourth millennium B.C., the first system of writing was invented in Mesopotamia by the Sumerians. At first pictographs were used for writing on clay and stone, but it was difficult to make curved lines on clay, for example, and scribes gradually deve-

loped the system of writing wedge-shaped straight signs with a stylus on soft clay. Some time in the first half of the third millennium B.C., the cuneiform system was adopted by the Semitic Akkadians of Mesopotamia and by the people of Ebla in Syria. As time passed the system was used by other peoples outside Mesopotamia. It was employed by the Elamites, the Hurrians and the Hittites. Thus it was used to write a number of unrelated languages. It will be recalled that at the beginning of this paper we mentioned that Edward Hincks and H.C. Rawlinson worked on the decipherment and elucidation of Old Persian. This was written in a simplified cuneiform script which was developed during the Achaemenid Persian period in the first millennium B.C.

During the last sixty years two new Semitic languages have been deciphered. These are Ugaritic, written on clay tablets in alphabetic cuneiform, and Eblaite, written on tablets found in 1974 during the excavation of Tell Mardikh in Syria. The discoveries at Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit), which is situated one kilometer from the coast of the Mediterranean and some ten kilometers north of Latakia in Syria, have often been described. It is sufficient to mention here that at Ugarit scribes used Akkadian cuneiform for international correspondence and some other documents, but the indigenous writing system was the unique alphabetic cuneiform. It was essentially the combination of a cuneiform method of writing with the alphabet already invented in Canaan. Twenty-nine signs were employed to represent the consonants and three alephs. This alphabetic script was used to write the mythological and religious texts as well as administrative texts and letters. The extant texts were written in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries B.C. in the Late Bronze Age, and most of them come from Ras Shamra. A number of Ugaritic texts have been found at Ras Ibn Hani, south of Ras Shamra, and a few texts have been found in other locations in Syria-Palestine and Cyprus.

In 1974, forty-two cuneiform tablets were discovered during the excavation of the Royal Palace of the ancient city of Ebla (modern Tell el-Mardikh) and in 1975 an archive of thousands of tablets and fragments came to light.<sup>14</sup> Tell Mardikh is about sixty-seven kilometers south of Aleppo, and the large mound has been extensively excavated by a team from the University of Rome. That this was the site of ancient Ebla was indicated when the name appeared in an inscription on the torso of a statue found there. In one of the rooms where the tablets were found there was evidence that they had been kept on wooden shelves in some sort of order. The clay tablets of the Ebla archives are written in the cuneiform system introduced by the Sumerians. The Semitic language attested in these texts may well be the oldest known form of Semitic, and although a certain number of features seem to indicate the classification of Eblaite as East

Semitic, closer scrutiny suggests that we have a separate and distinct 'Syrian' linguistic entity. The tablets of Ebla vary in size. Some are small and round, some are square with rounded edges, but there are also very large rectangular tablets. Among these spectacular finds, there is a group of tablets from which scholars like G. Pettinato and A. Archi have been able to reconstruct a vocabulary list of hundreds of Sumerian words, many of them with their Eblaite counterparts.

The writing of ancient Egypt is known to us in three forms: hieroglyphs (Greek *hieros*, 'sacred' and *glyphē*, 'carving'); hieratic (Greek *hieratikos*, 'priestly'); and demotic (Greek *demotikos*, 'popular'). The hieroglyphic system made its appearance at the end of the fourth millennium and was used until the fourth or fifth century A.D. Hieratic is a cursive form of the hieroglyphic script, which was usually written on papyrus with pen and ink. Its development was inevitable for it was a quicker method of writing, but, of course, the cursive characters were not pictorial like the hieroglyphs. It was used until the third century A.D. By the seventh century B.C., a still more abbreviated form of the script was introduced and this is known as demotic. It lasted until the fifth century A.D. Hieroglyphs were carved on stone, engraved in metal or wood, and drawn on papyrus. The cursive hieratic and demotic scripts were used in everyday writing, normally on papyrus, though in time there developed the practice of using hieratic for religious texts as distinct from administrative documents.

Some time in the second millennium B.C., a brilliant invention was made when a scribe realized that his language could be written with fewer signs than were employed in the writing system he was using, for hitherto he would have been burdened with the large number of signs of a syllabary. In all likelihood this revolutionary breakthrough, the invention of the alphabet, was made by a Canaanite in Palestine in the early second millennium B.C. The Old Canaanite script is attested to in Palestine in the seventeenth to the twelfth centuries B.C. most conspicuously in the Proto-Siniatic inscriptions dated to the sixteenth century B.C., which are important evidence for the link between the earliest form of the alphabet and the older Egyptian hieroglyphic system. By the first millennium the alphabet is widely used and dozens of inscriptions in Aramaic, Hebrew, Moabite, Phoenician-Punic, and Ammonite provide scholars with ample material for a reasonably clear view of its development.

As we have seen already, stone and clay were used as writing materials throughout the ancient Near East, depending on the writing system employed. Metal, linen, wood and potsherds were also used, but papyrus and leather were to play a very important role in the development of the scroll and the book. Papyrus was already being made in Egypt at the end of the fourth millennium and leather documents are in use in the same land by the middle of the third millennium.

Leather scrolls of a later period in Palestine are well known through the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Since it is the aim of this conference to examine the development of the book, it is appropriate to end with the reminder that throughout the ancient Near East from the end of the fourth millennium onwards, writing was a hallmark of civilization and progress.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> No proper biography of Hincks has been written, but extensive parts of his correspondence were published by his grandson: E.F. Davidson, *Edward Hincks. A Selection from his Correspondence with a Memoir* (London 1933).

<sup>2</sup> For details, see K.J. Cathcart and P. Donlon, 'Edward Hincks (1792-1866): A Bibliography of his Publications', *Orientalia* 52 (1983) 325-356.

<sup>3</sup> An assessment of his contribution to the elucidation of Egyptian has yet to be written. For some information on his work in Cuneiform, see S.A. Pallis, *The Antiquity of Iraq* (Copenhagen 1956) *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> *A Grammar of the Hebrew Language* (Dublin 1832).

<sup>5</sup> *The Dublin University Review* 1.3 (1833). The article is only known to me in the form of two offprints. One is in the library of the Royal Irish Academy and the other, donated by Hincks himself, in the British Library. See the remarks in *Orientalia* 52 (1983) 327-328.

<sup>6</sup> 'Some Passages of the Life of King Darius, the Son of Hystaspes, by Himself', *The Dublin University Magazine* 29/169 (1847) 14-27.

<sup>7</sup> 'On the first and second Kinds of Persepolitan Writing', *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* 21 (1846) 114-131.

<sup>8</sup> See especially Nos. 40, 41, 55 in the Hincks bibliography in *Orientalia* 52 (1983) 336-339.

<sup>9</sup> *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* 21 (1846) 114-131.

<sup>10</sup> 'On the Khorsabad Inscriptions', *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy* 22 (1850) 3-72.

<sup>11</sup> The results were published by the Royal Asiatic Society in *Inscription of Tiglath Pileser I, King of Assyria, B.C. 1150 as translated by Sir Henry Rawlinson, Fox Talbot, Esq., Dr. Hincks, and Dr. Oppert* (London 1857). This publication also appeared in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 18 (1861) 150-219.

<sup>12</sup> 'Specimen Chapters of an Assyrian Grammar', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* N.S. 2 (1866) 480-519.

<sup>13</sup> 'On a newly discovered record of ancient lunar Eclipses', *Monatsberichte der königlich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin. Aus dem Jahre 1866* (1867) 647-655.

<sup>14</sup> For a convenient survey of research and publications on the Ebla tablets see K.A. Tangberg, 'Eblaite. An Introduction to the State of Research on the Cuneiform Tablets of Ebla', *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 2 (1987) 111-120.