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The Adaption of Akkadian into Cuneiform

Cover Page Note

1. Jerrold S. Cooper, "The Origin of the Cuneiform Writing System," in *The First Writing: Script Invention as History and Process*, ed. Stephen Houston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 76-77. 2. Ibid, 76-77. 3. Jerrold S. Cooper, "Sumerian and Akkadian", in *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 37. 4. Jerrold S. Cooper, "Sumerian and Akkadian", in *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 43. 5. Ibid, 43. 6. Ibid, 43. 7. Ibid 42. 8. Amalia E. Gnanadesikan. *The Writing Revolution: From Cuneiform to the Internet*. (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Wiley and Blackwell, 2009), 21. 9. Jerrold S. Cooper, "Sumerian and Semitic Writing in Most Ancient Syro-Mesopotamia" in *Languages and Cultures in Contact*, ed. K. Van Lerberghe and G. Voet (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 64. 10. Ibid, 71. 11. Guy Deutscher, *Syntactic Change in Akkadian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 20-21. 12. Andrew George. "Babylonian and Assyrian: A History of Akkadian," in *Languages of Iraq, Ancient and Modern*, ed. J. N. Postgate (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2007), 38. 13. John Huehnergard, "Semitic Languages" in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Scribners, 1995), 2119. 14. Ibid, 2120. 15. Jerrold S. Cooper, "Sumerian and Semitic Writing in Most Ancient Syro-Mesopotamia" in *Languages and Cultures in Contact*, ed. K. Van Lerberghe and G. Voet (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 67. 16. Ibid, 66. 17. Ibid, 66. 18. Ibid, 66. 19. Aruz, Joan and Ronald Wallenfels, ed. *Art of the First Cities: the Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 168. 20. Andrew George. "Babylonian and Assyrian: A History of Akkadian," in *Languages of Iraq, Ancient and Modern*, ed. J. N. Postgate (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2007), 35. 21. Jerrold S. Cooper, "Sumerian and Akkadian", in *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45. 22. Deutscher, 19. 23. Andrew George. "Babylonian and Assyrian: A History of Akkadian," in *Languages of Iraq, Ancient and Modern*, ed. J. N. Postgate (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2007), 39. 24. Ibid 39. 25. Ibid, 39. 26. Robert K. Englund, "The Proto-Elamite Script" *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 160. 27. Ibid, 160. 28. Ibid, 160. 29. Gnanadesikan, 22. 30. Jerrold S. Cooper, "Sumerian and Akkadian", in *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45. 31. Deutscher, 21. 32. Jerrold S. Cooper, "The Origin of the Cuneiform Writing System," in *The First Writing: Script Invention as History and Process*, ed. Stephen Houston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 91. 33. Jerrold S. Cooper, "Sumerian and Akkadian", in *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 47. 34. Ibid, 47. 35. Ibid, 47. 36. Ibid, 47. 37. Ibid, 47. 38. Ibid, 46. 39. Ibid, 48. 40. Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000-323 BC*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 75. 41. Andrew George. "Babylonian and Assyrian: A History of Akkadian," in *Languages of Iraq, Ancient and Modern*, ed. J. N. Postgate (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2007), 42. 42. Ibid, 42. 43. Ibid, 42. 44. Ibid, 31. 45. Deutscher, 18. 46. Jerrold S. Cooper, "Sumerian and Akkadian", in *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 37. 47. Andrew George. "Babylonian and Assyrian: A History of Akkadian," in *Languages of Iraq, Ancient and Modern*, ed. J. N. Postgate (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2007), 36. 48. Gene B. Gragg, "Other Languages", in *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 58. 49. Gene B. Gragg, "Other Languages", in *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 59. 50. Ibid, 59. 51. Ibid, 61. 52. Ibid, 64. 53. Ibid, 61. 54. Ibid, 61-62. 55. Ibid, 64. 56. Ibid, 64-65. 57. Ibid, 65. 58. Ibid, 64. 59. Ibid, 66. 60. Ibid, 65.

61. Ibid, 68. 62. Andrew George. "Babylonian and Assyrian: A History of Akkadian," in *Languages of Iraq, Ancient and Modern*, ed. J. N. Postgate (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2007), 63.

Cuneiform, possibly the earliest attested writing system, was used to represent very different languages over the course of three millennia. The adaptation of the cuneiform writing system from Sumerian into the Semitic language of Akkadian had already occurred by 2350 BCE. The adaptation of cuneiform to Akkadian is connected to the respect the Akkadian/Semitic speaking scribes felt cuneiform deserved. At the foundation of this process was the rebus principle that Sumerians had used to expand their sign repertoire so as to be able to represent their language's grammatical features.

Cuneiform came into existence at the end of the Uruk IV period, but it is only in the ensuing centuries, between the Uruk III to the Jemdet Nasr periods, that it began to develop into a full-fledged writing system. Writing seems to have been invented in the Ancient Near East for administrative purposes, as the earliest surviving tablets are mostly administrative in nature.¹ Even in the proto-cuneiform phase, a reader of the writing system is confronted with an elaborate system of logographic and numerical signs.² The earliest attestation of cuneiform appears to represent Sumerian, a language isolate, i.e. without any living or dead relatives. Sumerian died out as a spoken language by the early 2nd millennium BCE but continued to be used for religious and legal purposes until the beginning of the Common Era.³ Sumerian was an agglutinative language, meaning that nouns, suffixes, and verbs took both prefixes and suffixes to reflect grammatical and syntactical information and relationships to other words.⁴ This later expressed itself in the writing system.

The writing system is logosyllabic in nature with unbound morphemes representing logograms and bound morphemes representing rebus-principle derived syllabograms, usually V, CV, or VC.⁵ Curiously, recording of affixes did not occur until about 2900 BCE, when Sumerian had begun to die out as a spoken language.⁶ Cuneiform also developed a complicated system of determinatives that aided the reader by illustrating the exact nature of an object whenever ambiguity may hinder understanding. Another characteristic that affected the way Sumerian was written in cuneiform is the fact that Sumerian had a monosyllabic system and had numerous homonyms and near homonyms. Due to this, the Sumerians used the rebus principle to “represent a large number of lexemes with a relatively small

¹ Jerrold S. Cooper, “The Origin of the Cuneiform Writing System,” in *The First Writing: Script Invention as History and Process*, ed. Stephen Houston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 76-77.

² Ibid, 76-77.

³ Jerrold S. Cooper, “Sumerian and Akkadian”, in *The World's Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 37.

⁴ Ibid, 43.

⁵ Ibid, 43.

⁶ Ibid, 43.

number of signs.”⁷ Thus, words that sounded similar could be represented with different signs and the same signs could also stand for two or more morphemes that meant different thing in Sumerian.⁸

The way Sumerian was written is important to understand its adaptation to Akkadian. Tablets found in the ancient cities of Fara and Abu-Salabikh, dating to ca 2600 BCE preserve the first attestation of a Semitic language.⁹ The texts, written in Old Sumerian, preserve Semitic personal names. In fact, the appearance of Semitic names coincides with the moment when Sumerian cuneiform began to be used to record history, literature, and other matters beyond record keeping. Scholars such as Jerrold S. Cooper have suggested that the need to write Semitic names stimulated the need for Sumerian cuneiform to expand and write literature.¹⁰ Many loanwords from Akkadian also worked their way into Old Sumerian.¹¹ It is also around this time that tablets began to represent in Old Sumerian “the presence of Semitic prepositions, pronouns, numbers, and other particles betrays the language of composition.”¹² This means that even before Sumerian cuneiform had yet to become a full-fledged writing system, scribes had the ability to write a Semitic language.

Besides the personal names attested in the Fara and Abu-Salabikh tablets, the first attested written Semitic language is not in fact Akkadian, but Eblaite. Eblaite is, like Akkadian, an East Semitic language. The Eblaite language is attested only from the Ebla archives which date to ca 2450-2350 BCE. In the 1970s a large cache of tablets were found at Ebla. The texts were mostly written in Sumerian, but there were some written in Eblaite.¹³ Among the so-called Ebla archives tablets were “bilingual texts, certain administrative documents, and some literary texts,” this may suggest that the texts were meant for Eblaite speaking scribes.¹⁴ Eblaite cuneiform appears to be a period of experimentation with an

⁷ Ibid 42.

⁸ Amalia E. Gnanadesikan. *The Writing Revolution: From Cuneiform to the Internet*. (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Wiley and Blackwell, 2009), 21.

⁹ Jerrold S. Cooper, “Sumerian and Semitic Writing in Most Ancient Syro-Mesopotamia” in *Languages and Cultures in Contact*, ed. K. Van Lerberghe and G. Voet (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 64.

¹⁰ Ibid, 71.

¹¹ Guy Deutscher, *Syntactic Change in Akkadian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 20-21.

¹² Andrew George. “Babylonian and Assyrian: A History of Akkadian,” in *Languages of Iraq, Ancient and Modern*, ed. J. N. Postgate (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2007), 38.

¹³ John Huehnergard, “Semitic Languages” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Scribners, 1995), 2119.

¹⁴ Ibid, 2120.

early writing system.¹⁵ Written Eblaite is a mixture of Sumerograms and phonetic writing; however its system is very different from both Sumerian and Old Akkadian cuneiform.¹⁶ The writing system prefers phonetic writing for personal names and linguistic elements other than nouns or verbs. For these, it uses Sumerograms.¹⁷ While Eblaite is a Semitic language, it is not writing phonetically for 2 reasons: 1) Sumerian at the time was heavily logographic and there were no models for a fully phonetic writing system and 2) no script has ever evolved into a completely phonetic system, Eblaite was not different and one cannot understate the force of tradition.¹⁸ However, the Eblaite phenomenon lasted only for a century and it ended curiously around the time that the Akkadian dynasty came to power and Ebla was destroyed by a conflagration.¹⁹ This fire forever preserved the last phase in the Ebla archives. This suggestion of timing is not to propose that one of the leaders of the Akkadian dynasty destroyed the city of Ebla, as scholars just do not know who raised Ebla, but the timing is coincidental.

Akkadian is one of two languages that belong to the East Semitic language family and one of the best attested Semitic languages. It is classified in several dialects used in different periods that often have very different vocabulary, grammatical structure, and way the signs are transcribed. While Akkadian has several Semitic features, three characteristics distinguish it from other Semitics languages: “ (a) the range of consonants is sharply reduced; probably under the influence of Sumerian , (b) word order in prose is subject-object-verb (SOV) as in Sumerian (Semitic is usually VSO), and (c) the verbal conjugations are put to uses different from their counterparts in other Semitic.”²⁰ Scholars have an enormous amount of texts with which to work with to examine Sumerian’s influence on Akkadian.

The earliest attested phase of Akkadian is called Old Akkadian. This language was in use between 2350 BCE and 2150 BCE and it was written in cuneiform based on rebus principle style writing that had been used to write Semitic and non-Sumerian names for centuries.²¹ The name Old Akkadian was

¹⁵ Jerrold S. Cooper, “Sumerian and Semitic Writing in Most Ancient Syro-Mesopotamia” in *Languages and Cultures in Contact*, ed. K. Van Lerberghe and G. Voet (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 67.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 66.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 66.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 66.

¹⁹ Aruz, Joan and Ronald Wallenfels, ed. *Art of the First Cities: the Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 168.

²⁰ Andrew George. “Babylonian and Assyrian: A History of Akkadian,” in *Languages of Iraq, Ancient and Modern*, ed. J. N. Postgate (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2007), 35.

²¹ Jerrold S. Cooper, “Sumerian and Akkadian”, in *The World’s Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45.

selected because it was assumed that “no dialectal variation between the Babylonian and Assyrian idioms existed in this period. In reality, the situation is much more complex, and there must have been a dialect continuum in the region by this time.”²² The conquering of Sumer by Sargon I of Akkad seems to have caused Akkadian to become the administrative language of the Sargonic state. As Andrew George pointed out, “presumably [Akkadian] was chosen because it was the common language of Sargon and the men of Akkade [Akkad] who governed his dominions.”²³ It was used by Sargon and his successors as “the official language of record..., the vehicle of monumental inscriptions, administrative texts, and official correspondence.”²⁴ The language is attested in the Habur triangle, Ashur, Gasur, Suleimeh, Kish, Nippur, Adab, Ur, and Lagash-Girsu as well as Elam.²⁵

The fact that Old Akkadian is attested in these regions does not mean that it was the spoken language of the region. It may, however, have been official ‘bureaucratic’ language. While it is difficult to ascertain where Old Akkadian was spoken, it seems likely that it was not spoken in Elam. Proto-Elamite is attested from the fourth to the beginning of the third millennium, (i.e. from the Jemdet Nasr to Early Dynastic I Period.)²⁶ It is called Proto-Elamite because it is considered the predecessor of Old Elamite.²⁷ The writing system has not been deciphered, but by comparing it with proto-cuneiform, the ideographic nature of the tablets has become understood.²⁸ The existence of Proto-Elamite tablets attests to the fact that the scribes of Susa were speaking something other than Sumerian or Old Akkadian. This mostly likely did not change even when Akkadian became the administrative language of Elam, but eventually Elam developed its own writing system, which reflected its own language.

Written Old Akkadian highly borrows from Sumerian and should be looked at in depth. In fact “Akkadian scribes had worked ways to adapt Sumerian cuneiform to their own language. Quite simply they took the *meanings* of some of the logograms and supplemented them with the *sounds* of the syllabograms. Thus the sign for “reed,” Sumerian *gi*, was now pronounced *qanuum*, or when it meant “to render,” *taarum*. But it could also stand for the syllable [gi] in a word spelled

²² Deutscher, 19.

²³ Andrew George. “Babylonian and Assyrian: A History of Akkadian,” in *Languages of Iraq, Ancient and Modern*, ed. J. N. Postgate (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2007), 39.

²⁴ Ibid 39.

²⁵ Ibid, 39.

²⁶ Robert K. Englund, “The Proto-Elamite Script” *The World’s Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 160.

²⁷ Ibid, 160.

²⁸ Ibid, 160.

syllabically!”²⁹ This is the rebus principle in action! Most of the signs chosen by Akkadian scribes were open syllables of V, CV, VC, but in different periods CVC were also used.³⁰ Akkadian (and Semitic languages in general) is ill-suited for logosyllabic writing, as it is not monosyllabic, like Sumerian, and it is difficult to adapt a writing system for a language that is not similar to the original attested language. Due to the fact that Akkadian is a Semitic language, the consonants hold the meaning of a word and a logosyllabic writing system would not always allow the core consonants to be reflected in the written word. Akkadian scribes had to be creative to accurately reflect their language in writing.

The prestige of Sumerian cuneiform had a tight hold on Akkadian speaking scribes. In fact, the close relationship between Sumerian and Akkadian has been described as a *Sprachbund*.³¹ Quite simply, Akkadian could have been written entirely phonetically just as Eblaite. However, as Akkadian was adapted into cuneiform, the prestige of Sumerian cuneiform “led to a mixed system in which Sumerograms... appear with or without phonetic complements in context with other words written entirely phonetically...In some dialects and text genres, Akkadian writing is overwhelmingly phonetic, but in others there is a good deal of logography, especially in administrative and legal texts.”³² An entirely Old Akkadian phonetic system was a possibility; however, as it had occurred with Eblaite, the possibilities of fully phonetic writing were never realized. The respect that Sumerian cuneiform had among Semitic speaking scribes prevented a full exploration into the potential of Akkadian phonetic writing. Why the Akkadian speaking scribes were loyal to Sumerian cuneiform enough to transcribe their tablets with both Sumerian and Akkadian translations and never explored the possibility of branching out from under the wings of Sumerian cuneiform may never be known.

Akkadian and Sumerian cuneiform also held other similarities. Like Sumerian, Akkadian has three primary vowels, /a, i, u/ with a rare /e/ thrown in.³³ Old Akkadian, however, has three distinctions for /u/: u=/yu/, ú=/u/, and ù =/?u/.³⁴ Akkadian also developed a particular system relating to the representation of CVC words, a complex carryover from Sumerian. From Old Akkadian on, CVC words could be used to write /dan/ or /maš/ but never used to write /lan/ or

²⁹ Gnanadesikan, 22.

³⁰ Jerrold S. Cooper, “Sumerian and Akkadian”, in *The World’s Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45.

³¹ Deutscher, 21.

³² Jerrold S. Cooper, “The Origin of the Cuneiform Writing System,” in *The First Writing: Script Invention as History and Process*, ed. Stephen Houston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 91.

³³ Jerrold S. Cooper, “Sumerian and Akkadian”, in *The World’s Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 47.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 47.

/baš/.³⁵ The CVC words that were never actually written as CVC words were represented by V, CV, or VC.³⁶ Another similarity is the small amount of homophony and polyphony that existed in Old Akkadian and was represented, although neither ever approached the amount that occurred in Sumerian cuneiform.³⁷ Sumerian left a permanent mark on Old Akkadian and the way it was represented in writing.

Old Akkadian had different aspects that exemplified its Semitic nature. Scholars know that Old Akkadian contained features such as voiced, voiceless and “emphatic” phonemes that Sumerian did not have.³⁸ As such, these sounds did not have a graphic representation as there was no example of how to represent these linguistic factors. Also different from Sumerian was the complex orthography that developed around double consonants and long vowels. In Akkadian, “double consonants can only be written as grammatically justified. Similarly, long vowels may or may not be indicated (by adding the appropriate V sign after a CV sign), but are usually grammatically justified when written, and almost always expressed in word final position when derived from the contraction of etymologically dissimilar consonants.”³⁹ These factors reflect the Semitic nature of Old Akkadian.

The Akkadian language that followed the fall of the Akkadian empire was a very different from Old Akkadian. After a fifty year power vacuum following the fall of Akkad, a new dynasty came into power in Southern Mesopotamia. It is known as the Ur III dynasty and it ruled from the city of Ur for about a century (2100-2000 BCE).⁴⁰ Sumerian became the preferred administrative language of Ur III but Akkadian is attested in this period.⁴¹ However the Akkadian of this period is different because Old Akkadian originated in the north while Ur III Akkadian developed in the south appears to be the geographical variants of an archaic Akkadian language.⁴² In fact Ur III Akkadian is more closely related to Old Babylonian than Old Akkadian.⁴³ The Akkadian of Northern Mesopotamia and Southern Mesopotamia were in fact so different that a good case could be made for them to be considered separate languages, just as the people of

³⁵ Ibid, 47.

³⁶ Ibid, 47.

³⁷ Ibid, 47.

³⁸ Ibid, 46.

³⁹ Ibid, 48.

⁴⁰ Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000-323 BC*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 75.

⁴¹ Andrew George. “Babylonian and Assyrian: A History of Akkadian,” in *Languages of Iraq, Ancient and Modern*, ed. J. N. Postgate (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2007), 42.

⁴² Ibid, 42.

⁴³ Ibid, 42.

Mesopotamia did.⁴⁴ The Akkadian attested in Northern Mesopotamia is referred to as Assyrian and the Akkadian of the South is referred to as Babylonian. Both dialects of Akkadian have Old (ca. 2500-2000 BCE), Middle (ca. 2000-1500 BCE) and Neo (1000-500 BCE) periods which are roughly contemporary.⁴⁵ There is also a Late Babylonian dialect, which was attested during the Persian and Seleucid eras, from 539 BCE to 75 CE, when the last attested cuneiform tablet is dated.⁴⁶ Old Akkadian is not the direct ancestor of either of these dialects and they must have evolved from another archaic version of Akkadian.⁴⁷ But without Old Akkadian neither of these dialects would be attested and for that scholars must thank the inventiveness of the Old Akkadian scribes.

In the Ancient Near East, cuneiform was equally respected and highly adaptable. The adaptation of cuneiform into languages other than Sumerian took several different forms. It could be used simply to express proper names as occurred for Amorite, isolated glosses as for Kassite, texts in related Semitic languages (Eblaite, or Canaanite).⁴⁸ Alternatively, it developed into a writing system as it occurred for four different languages: Elamite, Hurrian, Uratian and Hittite. These four cases are privileged and show that cuneiform had multiple lives in the Ancient Near East.

Elam was located in modern day Iran and had many interactions with its Mesopotamian neighbors. After the introduction of Old Akkadian, the Elamites developed their own writing system but still used Akkadian as its administrative language from 2500-331 BCE. The Elamite adaptation of cuneiform is marked by a large reduction of signs used by scribes, “for the whole period only 206 signs are used, and in any given period (Old, Middle, Neo-, and Archaemenid) the total numbers of signs used remains remarkably constant-at about 130” signs.⁴⁹ The only change is the complexity of the syllabary and the number of logograms; these increased as the writing system continued to develop.⁵⁰ This seems strange considering the fact that in cuneiform writing, the writing systems often became more syllabic as the writing systems developed.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 31.

⁴⁵ Deutscher, 18.

⁴⁶ Jerrold S. Cooper, “Sumerian and Akkadian”, in *The World’s Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 37.

⁴⁷ Andrew George. “Babylonian and Assyrian: A History of Akkadian,” in *Languages of Iraq, Ancient and Modern*, ed. J. N. Postgate (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2007), 36.

⁴⁸ Gene B. Gragg, “Other Languages”, in *The World’s Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 58.

⁴⁹ Gene B. Gragg, “Other Languages”, in *The World’s Writing Systems*, ed. Peter T. Daniels and William Bright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 59.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 59.

The Hurrian language was first attested in cuneiform in the third millennium in what is now modern day northern Syria, Iraq, and Turkey.⁵¹ The Hurrian writing system like Elamite was also adapted from Old Akkadian.⁵² Hurrian is closely related to Urartian but is otherwise an isolate. Like Elamite, in Hurrian cuneiform the number of signs was reduced and the system was in fact a syllabary. Hurrian contained 43 (C)V signs, 34 VC signs, a few CVC signs and a limited number of determinatives and logograms.⁵³ What sets Hurrian apart is the attempt by Hurrian speaking scribes to differentiate between voice/voiceless consonants.⁵⁴ An attempt to write the language exactly as it was spoken; however the Hurrian cuneiform writing system died out around 1000 BCE.

Urartian is attested from around 850 BCE to 650 BCE, almost exclusively on the monumental architecture of the civilization of Urartu. Urartian seems to have been directly adopted from contemporary Neo-Assyrian cuneiform texts and does not appear to have been influenced by the Hurrian writing system.⁵⁵ As Elamite and Hurrian, Urartian too reduced the sign repertoire to 59 (C)V signs, 18 VC signs, 22 CVC signs, and a larger corpus of logograms than was attested in Hurrian.⁵⁶ There was also a complex structure of determinatives. Urartian, however, did not differentiate between geminate writing. This explains its lack of a larger corpus of VC signs, and used T- and Q- for glottalized dentals and velars.⁵⁷ While Urartian cuneiform managed to survive until 650 BCE, it eventually died out due to ethnic replacement by Armenians in the region.⁵⁸

Hittite is the final language which adapted cuneiform I am examining here. It was attested mainly during the 15th to 13th centuries BCE. The majority of the texts have been excavated from the Hittite capital city of Hattuša.⁵⁹ Hittite belongs to the Indo-European linguistic family and is the only language of this linguistic family attested in cuneiform. The corpus of Hittite cuneiform is large with “varied, extensive, and well-studied copies of texts of literary, religious, historical, and legal content.”⁶⁰ Written Hittite did not simplify cuneiform as Elamite, Hurrian, and Urartian had done. The Hittite writing system has around 375 signs. 86 signs form the core syllabary of CV, V, and VC signs. However, each sign has at least one logographic meaning and 41 signs function as

⁵¹ Ibid, 61.

⁵² Ibid, 64.

⁵³ Ibid, 61.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 61-62.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 64.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 64-65.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 65.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 64.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 66.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 65.

determinatives.⁶¹ Most of the logograms are Sumerograms and are derived from Sumerian cuneiform. However, there is also a complex system based on Akkadian and Akkadograms. The Hittite language seems ambivalent to relating voice/voiceless stops in the language and only does so occasionally with vowels. The understanding of the Hittite language has been facilitated because it belongs to the Indo-European linguistic family, a much larger and better attested language family than any other language in the Ancient Near East.

Cuneiform was a very adaptable writing system that was attested in various forms for nearly three millennia. Cuneiform was created to represent the language of Sumerian and its first adaptation was into the Semitic language of Eblaite. However the most successful adaptation of the cuneiform writing system occurred with Akkadian. Old Akkadian was adapted into cuneiform around 2350 BCE and its linguistic descendents became the lingua franca of the Near East before drifting out of use after the creation of the alphabet, with the last known document written in Akkadian cuneiform being an astrological almanac from 75 CE.⁶² Besides Sumerian and Akkadian, cuneiform was successfully adapted for Elamite, Hurrian, Urartian, and Hittite. These languages, with the exception of Hurrian and Urartian, were not related to one another and belonged to different linguistic families. This speaks to the malleability of the cuneiform writing system and the admiration and respect it commanded throughout the Ancient Near East.

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⁶¹ Ibid, 68.

⁶² Andrew George. "Babylonian and Assyrian: A History of Akkadian," in *Languages of Iraq, Ancient and Modern*, ed. J. N. Postgate (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 2007), 63.

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