

June 6, 2011

## After 90 Years, a Dictionary of an Ancient World

By [JOHN NOBLE WILFORD](#)



Martha Roth, dean of humanities at the University of Chicago, and Gil Stein, director of the Oriental Institute there.

Ninety years in the making, the 21-volume dictionary of the language of ancient Mesopotamia and its Babylonian and Assyrian dialects, unspoken for 2,000 years but preserved on clay tablets and in stone inscriptions deciphered over the last two centuries, has finally been completed by scholars at the [University of Chicago](#).

This was the language that Sargon the Great, king of Akkad in the 24th century B.C., spoke to command what is reputed to be the world's first empire, and that Hammurabi used around 1700 B.C. to proclaim the first known code of laws. It was the vocabulary of the Epic of Gilgamesh, the first masterpiece of world literature. Nebuchadnezzar II presumably called on these words to soothe his wife, homesick for her native land, with the promise of cultivating the wondrous Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

On all levels, this was the language of enterprise, the irrigation of lands and shipments of cultivated grain, and of fate foretold. Medical texts in Babylonia gave explicit instructions as to how to read a sheep's liver to divine the future.



**M. Spencer Green/Associated Press**

A Babylonian grammatical text stone tablet used in the research and assembly of the ancient dictionary.

At a conference on Monday, historians, archaeologists and specialists in ancient Semitic languages assessed the significance of the comprehensive dictionary, which Gil Stein, director of the university's Oriental Institute, said "is an indispensable research tool for any scholar anywhere who seeks to explore the written record of the Mesopotamian civilization."

One scholar who has relied on the project's research at various stages since the 1960s, Jerrold Cooper, professor emeritus in Semitic languages at Johns Hopkins University, said the dictionary's importance "can't possibly be overestimated." It opens up for study "the richest span of cuneiform writing," he said, referring to the script invented in the fourth millennium B.C. by the earlier Sumerians in Mesopotamia.

This was probably the first writing system anywhere, and the city-states that arose in the Tigris and Euphrates River Valleys, mainly in what is present-day Iraq and parts of Syria, are considered the earliest urban and literate civilization. The dictionary, with 28,000 words now defined in their various shades of meaning, covers a period from 2500 B.C. to A.D. 100.

Oddly, for a work reflecting such meticulous research, its title, the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, is an outdated misnomer. When the project was started in 1921 by James Henry Breasted, founder of the Oriental Institute, much of the written material in hand was attributed to Assyrian rulers. Also, biblical references left the impression that the term "Assyrian" was synonymous with most Semitic languages in antiquity, and so it is often used still to describe the academic field of study. Actually, the basic language in question is Akkadian.

And the dictionary is more of an encyclopedia than simply a concise glossary of words and definitions. Many words with multiple meanings and extensive associations with history are

followed by page after page of discourse ranging through literature, law, religion, commerce and everyday life. There are, for example, 17 pages devoted to the word “umu,” meaning “day.”

The word “ardu,” for slave, introduces extensive material available on slavery in the culture. And it may or may not reflect on the society that one of its more versatile verbs was “kalu,” which in different contexts can mean detain, delay, hold back, keep in custody, interrupt and so forth. The word “di nu,” like “case” in English, Dr. Cooper pointed out, can refer to a legal case or lawsuit, a verdict or judgment, or to law in general.

“Every term, every word becomes a window into the culture,” Martha T. Roth, dean of humanities at Chicago who has worked on the project since 1979 and has been its editor in charge since 1996, said last week.

Even a dead language can prompt lively debate, as Matthew W. Stolper, a Chicago professor long involved in the project, once wrote. The dictionary’s translations, he noted, “run the gamut between conclusions founded on an unshakable array of evidence and provocative assertions about slim data.” All in all, he said, this “has provoked, cajoled, advanced and shaped the scholarship of a generation of not always cheerful Mesopotamianists.”

Dr. Roth expects more of the same. She said the full dictionary “provides the foundation upon which all other scholarship will be built,” and was “never intended to be the last word.”

So why did the project take so long to complete?

At the start, Dr. Breasted foresaw a set of six volumes, modeled on the Oxford English Dictionary, being published simultaneously in two or three decades. But entering words and examples of their use on close to two million index cards was tedious work for the professors and graduate students who were also busy with classes and other research. The low-tech task seemed endless: Previously unknown words or new usages of known words were always coming to light in archaeological ruins.

After World War II, the project was reorganized and the pace picked up; the first volume was published in 1956. Under the vigorous editorship of A. Leo Oppenheim, then Erica Reiner and finally Dr. Roth, 20 volumes were released over 55 years.

A full set sells for \$1,995, and individual volumes range from \$45 to \$150. But they are also [available, free of charge, online](#).