

# THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN THE STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF THE ANCIENT EAST

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## **Abstract**

This article analyzes the role of libraries in the study of the history of the Ancient East. In the article, the author focuses on the emergence of the first libraries in the ancient Mesopotamia, their role in the internal and foreign policy of the state, and the classification of library funds. The history of the Ashurbanipal Library, the largest cultural center in ancient Assyria, is also separately covered.

**Keywords:** Libraries, ancient Mesopotamia, ancient Assyria, cuneiform, Akkadian inscriptions, clay tablets, archives, palaces, British Museum.

## **Introduction**

It is known that the scientific knowledge, art, architecture, religion, writing and literature of ancient Mesopotamia served as a measure of the cultural development of the ancient Eastern peoples. It is worth noting here that most of the sources studied, along with material sources, are written monuments - books, documents, maps, correspondence, notices, and of course, all this is stored not everywhere, but in a sacred place called a library.

In ancient Mesopotamia, there was also a huge library that housed such documents, which was the Palace Library of Ashurbanipal. This place was a huge complex of clay tablets containing all kinds of texts of the last great king of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, Ashurbanipal. The library was founded in the 7th century BC and was considered the largest library in the ancient world [1. P. 33]. The texts were found during archaeological excavations at Kuyunjik (the ancient Assyrian capital of Nineveh) in northern Mesopotamia. Kuyunjik corresponds to the present-day city of Mosul in northern Iraq. Some documents have survived intact, but many of the manuscripts were excavated and buried for thousands of years, requiring reconstruction. Naturally, they were repaired.

In ancient Persian and Armenian sources, Alexander the Great of Macedon, having seen the Palace Library of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh, decided to create his own library, and Ashurbanipal's library became the inspiration and motivation for Alexander the Great in creating the Library of Alexander the Great. Indeed, Macedon was capable of building a great library, and construction work began, but Alexander did not reach the "inauguration ceremony" of the library, he died. His good work was completed by Ptolemy, a friend of Macedon, who considered himself Alexander's successor.

The library is believed to have been discovered by Austen Henry Layard in 1849, and all the tablets were transferred to England, to the British Museum, but since the tablets were found in one of the palace rooms of the king of the southwestern lands, Sennacherib (705–681 BC), they were not considered to belong to the library of Ashurbanipal, but this discovery was a world-famous find [2. P. 122]. Three years later, Hormuzd Rassam, an assistant to Layard, discovered a similar “library” in the palace of King Ashurbanipal (668–627 BC), on the opposite side of the hills from the palace of the king of the southwestern lands, Sennacherib. Unfortunately, the documents of this library are not recognized as a new discovery, but many scholars from Europe conducted research there. Finally, they combined the two library tablets and concluded that they were one library. Most of the tablets were taken away by researchers from European countries for repair. When the work is completed, they are returned to British and local museums. Scholars who want to study the meaning of the inscriptions on the tablets are also given the tablets on certain conditions, namely, on the condition that they translate the texts without changing their meaning at all.

Ashurbanipal left his name in history as an extremely bloodthirsty, warlike, and conquering king, but he was also extremely strict, literate, and interested in books and the writings of scholars. He gathered skilled calligraphers under his command, ordered them to collect ancient texts, bring sources in the Akkadian-Sumerian languages, and created all the necessary conditions for this. The calligraphers went to Babylon, copied all the texts there in two different scripts and languages, baked them in special ovens, and returned. Ashurbanipal rewarded them handsomely for these services and made the calligraphers responsible for the preservation, protection, and use of the texts they had just created, and at the same time, he also provided them with strong soldiers to guard the library. No matter how cruel the Shah was, he was so gentle when it came to the fate of the library and protected it like the apple of his eye. Even when he went on invasion campaigns, he ordered his soldiers not to touch any of the city's libraries and scribes. When the battle was over, he would have the books of the defeated city's libraries written on clay tablets, bake them, return the books from the library to their places, and take the scribes of the conquered city-state with him.

Finally, the text tablets reached 30,000 clay tablets and the books were placed on 300 shelves. When the remains of the library were discovered, 2,000 written tablets were found intact and were delivered to their destination with great care. The remaining clay books were separated from the damaged ones in some way and repaired as much as possible, about 6,000 of these “treated” texts consisted of correspondence with the provinces, negotiations with other countries, peace treaties, treaties, taxes imposed on the people, obligations, aristocratic declarations. The remaining texts were related to medicine, astronomy, literature, while on other tablets there were songs, fairy tales, legends, prophecies, their own gods and the gods of other peoples, their duties, their relationship to them, temples, the situation in them, the construction process, the reason, let's say, everything was reflected in the books, as scientists who studied the clay tablets have stated in their articles.

At the same time, there are texts about the full text of the Epic of Gilgamesh, the poetry and laws of ancient Babylon, the legend of Adapa, the first man in the world, the history of the

creation of the earth, the stories of the first evil Nippur created after the creation of the universe. It is also worth noting that the Epic of Gilgamesh was personally written by King Ashurbanipal from beginning to end, and he allocated a single shelf only for the Epic of Gilgamesh.

The texts were mostly written in the wedge-shaped alphabet, cuneiform, and Akkadian script. However, for some reason there are no inscriptions in Latin script here, there is also some textual inscription, which is still unknown to this day. Among the tablets were also documents related to agriculture, and they are written in a special style and order, which distinguishes them from all other texts there.

BC In 612 BC, the armies of Babylon and Media united and defeated the armies of Nineveh and Assyria, and in 605 BC, they defeated the Assyrian army again with a crushing blow. After the battles in Nineveh, the library was burned down, and some scholars suggest that this fire may have destroyed the library. However, no researcher can provide any definite evidence. As we have said above, most of the library tablets are kept in the British Museum in London, but in addition to the British Museum, the Iraqi Museum also has rare tablets from the library [3. P. 36].

In the British Museum's collections, the collection of the Nineveh Library, consisting of 30,943 "clay tablets," is called the "Ashshurbanipal Texts Section" and has a separate catalog. Currently, the number of texts that have been fully restored, repaired, and previously preserved intact and can be viewed is 10,000. It is interesting that the documents in the library do not consist only of clay books, but also texts written on leather and papyrus, although in very small quantities, were found there and brought to the British Museum in a very "difficult" condition and "treated".

1. Azekah inscription - written on a clay tablet in Akkadian script. BC 700. This tablet was discovered in 1903, and by 1974 it was recognized by Nadav Na'aman as a "separate section tablet". Currently stored in the British Museum under the number K.6205 + BM 82-3-23,131. This tablet tells about the campaign of the Jewish king Azekah against the king of Sennacherib Hezekiah and the victory of the king of Sennacherib [4. P. 6].

2. Treaty between Tir Baal and Esarhaddon - written in Akkadian script on a clay tablet in 675 BC. This tablet was discovered in the 19th century. It is stored in the British Museum under the serial number K 3500+K 4444 +K.10235. It records the treaty concluded by Ashurbanipal's father Esarhaddon (reigned 681–669 BC) with Tir Baal. This text was translated and explained by Hugo Winkler in 1898 in his article "Ancient Near Eastern Studies". The text about the peace was reflected in two clay tablets. Esarhaddon conquers Eber Nari, after the battle he negotiates with Tyre Baal, according to which Esarhaddon gives several settlements from the conquered lands - Acre, Dor and Byblos to Tyre [5. P. 10].

3. Nimrud tablet, Nimrud - the modern city of Mosul, a city located near ancient Southern Nineveh, on the banks of the Tigris. This place was the capital of Assyria in 879–722 BC. As for the Nimrud tablet itself, it is written on a clay tablet in Akkadian script in 733 BC. This tablet was discovered in 1873 by George Smith. It is stored in the British Museum under the number K.3751. The inscription was written during the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III. There is detailed information about the first 17 years of his reign [6. P. 9].

4. Sargon II Prism A – written on a clay tablet in Akkadian script in 710 BC. This tablet was discovered in the 19th century. It is kept in the British Museum under the number K.1671+K.1668. The first part was found in 1668, and the rest was found and translated in 1903. It measures 6.4x4.4 cm. This clay tablet is attributed to Sargon II and contains complete information about him [7. P. 2].

5. The Venus Text of Ammitsaduk – the original length was 17.14 cm., but time has taken its toll on this tablet and now only 6.75 cm remains. The width is the same – at the time of writing it was 9.2 cm, and in its current state it is 3.6 cm. The thickness was 2.22 cm and is now 0.87 cm. This text dates back to the Neo-Assyrian period, was found in Kuyunjik, and is now in the British Museum under the serial number K.160. The text contains detailed information about the first astronomical observations [8. P. 3].

6. The Epic of Gilgamesh - the text of the world-famous epic, written in the 7th century BC under the personal supervision of Ashurbanipal. It is currently stored in the British Museum, several of the tablets have been repaired, and several more have been rewritten. It describes in detail the life, journey, and sorrows of the legendary Uruk king Gilgamesh or Bilgamish [9. P. 6].

7. The Creation of the Earth - found in fragments by Austin Henry Layard in 1849, repaired, and in 1876 George Smith translated it and published it to the public. This text is purely theological and is written in Sumerian-Akkadian script. This tablet is also preserved in the British Museum [10. P. 8].

The most famous collection of written monuments found in ancient Assyria is the “Library of Ashurbanipal” found in ancient Nineveh. It contains many literary texts that played a very important role in the study of the history of Babylonia and Assyria, in the reading of cuneiform. Along with literary texts, the royal office documents were also found there, which indicates that it was not a library in the modern sense, but an institution for storing documents. Researchers have noted that the documents in this collection have the highest quality of writing and preparation. The main part of the documents - 20,000 clay tablets - is stored in the British Museum [11. C. 45].

No information has been preserved about the internal structure of the “Library of Ashurbanipal”, it is only known that it was headed by a special official. However, from some documents it is possible to obtain information about the methods of storing and processing documents. In particular, the textual headings attached to the tablets and covers and the presence of the seal of the “King of Kings, King of Assyria” are such signs. Lists of tablets have also been preserved [12. C. 160].

The ancient archives of Mesopotamia served as an important source in the study of the history of the ancient world and the history of archival work. Today, the archival experience of this region is of great importance in the study of the history of archival work.

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