

Babylonian and Assyrian Literature

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The great nation which dwelt in the seventh century before our era on the banks of Tigris and Euphrates flourished in literature as well as in the plastic arts, and had an alphabet of its own. The Assyrians sometimes wrote with a sharp reed, for a pen, upon skins, wooden tablets, or papyrus brought from Egypt. In this case they used cursive letters of a Phoenician character. But when they wished to preserve their written documents, they employed clay tablets, and a stylus whose bevelled point made an impression like a narrow elongated wedge, or arrow-head. By a combination of these wedges, letters and words were formed by the skilled and practised scribe, who would thus rapidly turn off a vast amount of copy. All works of history, poetry, and law were thus written in the cuneiform or old Chaldean characters, and on a substance which could withstand the ravages of time, fire, or water. Hence we have authentic monuments of Assyrian literature in their original form, unglossed, unaltered, and ungarbled, and in this respect Chaldean records are actually superior to those of the Greeks, the Hebrews, or the Romans. The literature of the Chaldeans is very varied in its forms. The hymns to the gods form an important department, and were doubtless employed in public worship. They are by no means lacking in sublimity of expression, and while quite unmetrical they are proportioned and emphasized, like Hebrew poetry, by means of parallelism. In other respects they resemble the productions of Jewish psalmists, and yet they date as far back as the third millennium before Christ. They seem to have been transcribed in the shape in which we at present have them in the reign of Assurbanipal, who was a great patron of letters, and in whose reign libraries were formed in the principal cities. The Assyrian renaissance of the seventeenth century B.C. witnessed great activity among scribes and

book collectors: modern scholars are deeply indebted to this golden age of letters in Babylonia for many precious and imperishable monuments. It is, however, only within recent years that these works of hoar antiquity have passed from the secluded cell of the specialist and have come within reach of the general reader, or even of the student of literature. For many centuries the cuneiform writing was literally a dead letter to the learned world. The clue to the understanding of this alphabet was originally discovered in 1850 by Colonel Rawlinson, and described by him in a paper read before the Royal Society. Hence the knowledge of Assyrian literature is, so far as Europe is concerned, scarcely more than half a century old.

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