

ASSYRIOLOGY

Assyriology is a discipline which embraces the entirety of a human civilisation, over more than three thousand years. It is based on the analysis of documents in the Babylonian, Assyrian and Sumerian languages. From these, Assyriologists are able to study an enormous range of topics: from grammar to astrology, from the economy to religion, from medicine to social history.

The peoples concerned are those who lived in ancient Mesopotamia, a region which embraces modern Iraq and neighbouring regions of Syria, Turkey, and Iran. They started producing writings (inscribed clay tablets) in 'cuneiform' script around 3500 BC, and continued into the Common Era. Thus, cuneiform was written for over half of human history.

The Assyriology track gives you a solid foundation in the languages of Mesopotamia, and also trains you in the analysis of Mesopotamian sources, both written and archaeological. Along the way, you gain highly transferable skills in quantitative methods, close reading, original data analysis, examination of visual and material culture, and academic writing and presentation.



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The Languages

Babylonian and Assyrian (sometimes known by the cover term 'Akkadian'; c. 2000 BCE – c. 100 CE), were written in 'cuneiform' script. They are members of the Semitic family, and so related to Aramaic, Hebrew and Arabic. You can study Babylonian in all three years, and Assyrian in the third year.

Your 'set texts' in Babylonian and Assyrian will include compositions such as the inscriptions of Sennacherib, the king who besieged Jerusalem; the Epic of Gilgamesh, which first made headlines when it was found to contain a version of the story of Noah and the Ark; and Ištar's Descent to the Netherworld, a fascinating tale of a goddess who to get her way threatens to bring up the dead. With the latter two you will be reading writings from the library of Ashurbanipal.

Sumerian (c. 3200 BCE - 100 CE) is unrelated to any other known language. You can study it in Year 3, and it provides a completely different perspective on how languages work. The core grammar of Sumerian is usually taught through the inscriptions of Gudea, a ruler of the city-state of Lagash over four thousand years ago.

Teaching Resources

Cambridge leads the way in new methods for teaching Assyriology. We made the world's first Babylonian-language film, *The Poor Man of Nippur* (2018), acted by students. We emphasise learning ancient languages as languages, and not just as exercises on the page.

Your studies will be enhanced by handling high-definition replicas of some of your set texts. Specially hand-made for Cambridge Assyriology, these include a tablet of Hammurapi laws, Sennacherib's 'Taylor Prism', and Ištar's Descent.

Hands-on sessions are held in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, which has Sumerian inscriptions of Gudea inscribed on clay cones, and the Fitzwilliam Museum, which has a stunning example of the 'Standard Inscription' of Ashurnasirpal II.

The third-year dissertation is a great opportunity to undertake a significant piece of original research, with the support of your supervisor and the huge library resources which Cambridge offers.

Fieldwork

Assyriology students are given fieldwork training, and take part in archaeological field trips with students from across the Archaeology programme. In the summer following your second year you undertake up to six weeks of fieldwork, a study tour of sites and museums (in the Middle East or in Europe), or a museum placement. Departmental subsidies are available.

STRUCTURE

You take four modules per year. You can study Babylonian in all three, and Assyrian and Sumerian in the third. Modules are also available in Mesopotamian archaeology and culture.

Year 1

- Babylonian Language
- Egyptian Language
- World Archaeology
- Archaeology in Action
- Introduction to the Cultures of Egypt and Mesopotamia
- Being Human: Interdisciplinary Perspectives
- Humans in Biological Perspective
- A module in another department, including Social Anthropology or Psychology

Year 2

Compulsory modules:

- Babylonian Language or Intermediate Babylonian
- Mesopotamian archaeology: 1 Prehistory and Early states or 2 Territorial States to Empires (offered in alternate years)
- Mesopotamian culture: 1 Literature or 2 Religion and Scholarship (offered in alternate years)

Optional modules may include:

- Modules from Archaeology, or from another department, including Social Anthropology or Psychology

Year 3

Compulsory modules:

- Intermediate Babylonian or Advanced Babylonian and Assyrian
- Mesopotamian archaeology: 1 Prehistory and Early states or 2 Territorial States to Empires (offered in alternate years)

Optional modules may include:

- Sumerian Language
- Mesopotamian culture: 1 Literature or 2 Religion and Scholarship (offered in alternate years)
- Dissertation
- Modules from Archaeology, or from another department, including Social Anthropology or Psychology

