

A virtual Babylonian comeback 2,000 years after disappearance of natives

September 30 2010



Almost 2,000 years after its last native speakers disappeared, the sound of Ancient Babylonian is being lined up for an unlikely comeback, in an online audio archive.

Prompted by the enquiries of curious colleagues and friends, a University of Cambridge researcher, Dr. Martin Worthington, has begun what he hopes will be an ongoing project to record readings of Babylonian poems, myths and other texts in the original tongue.

The results are being compiled in an audio library, publically available and completely free, where users can stream Babylonian - one of the chief languages of Ancient Mesopotamia - while reading English

translations.

Just 30 recordings have been released so far, but they include excerpts from some of the earliest known works of world literature, dating back to the first years of the second millennium BC.

Dr. Worthington, an expert in Babylonian and Assyrian grammar based at St. John's College, Cambridge, put the collection together in his spare time. The readings are typically given by fellow Assyriologists, in an effort to present users with a variety of voices.

His hope is that having heard the sound of the [extinct language](#), some listeners will be sufficiently intrigued to investigate further, and perhaps end up studying the history, language or culture of the period.

"Whenever I tell people what I do, the first question they ask is what did Babylonian sound like, and how do you know?" Dr. Worthington said. "In the end I decided that the best thing to do would be to create a resource where they can listen to it for themselves."

"I also wanted to dispel some long-standing myths. Many people think that the further you go back in history, the less you know about it. In fact, we have masses of information about the Babylonians. The site aims to give users a taste of the richness and complexity of Ancient Mesopotamian culture, which is not something you normally learn much about at school."

The existing collection focuses on poetry in particular. Most of this is known from cuneiform inscriptions found on clay tablets in the area that was once Mesopotamia, and now comprises Iraq, as well as parts of Syria, Turkey and Iran.

"In many cases they are the equivalent of Old English tales like

Beowulf," Dr. Worthington added. "Through them, we meet gods, giants, monsters and all sorts of other weird and wonderful creatures. As stories they are amazing fun."

Many also bear strong parallels with Biblical tales. In Tablet 11 of The Epic of Gilgamesh, for example, users find the chief protagonist - the hero-king Gilgamesh - being instructed by the gods to prepare a boat ahead of a great flood. In The Poem of the Righteous Sufferer, a pious citizen, Shubshi-meshre-Shakkan, is afflicted by a range of unjust ills and ends up questioning the nature of his faith in a way that resembles the better-known Job.

Beyond literature, the site has also begun to accommodate other key documents from the period. Part of the Codex Hammurabi, for example, the ancient law code from 1790 BC, can be both read and heard - although perhaps mercifully users are not yet treated to all 281 of the laws and parallel punishments Hammurabi had listed.

Working out how Babylonian, or any dead language, sounded relies on a variety of strategies and techniques. In some cases, researchers are aided by later transcriptions into other languages, but often the sound is forensically deduced through the careful study of letter combinations and spelling patterns, using the original Cuneiform texts.

"It's essentially detective work," Dr. Worthington said. "We will never know for sure that a Babylonian would have approved of our attempts at pronunciation, but by looking at the original sources closely, we can make a pretty good guess."

More recordings for the online library are currently being prepared and Dr. Worthington hopes that it will continue to grow indefinitely. The present collection is available for use now at: www.speechisfire.com

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: A virtual Babylonian comeback 2,000 years after disappearance of natives (2010, September 30) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-09-virtual-babylonian-comeback-years-natives.html>

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