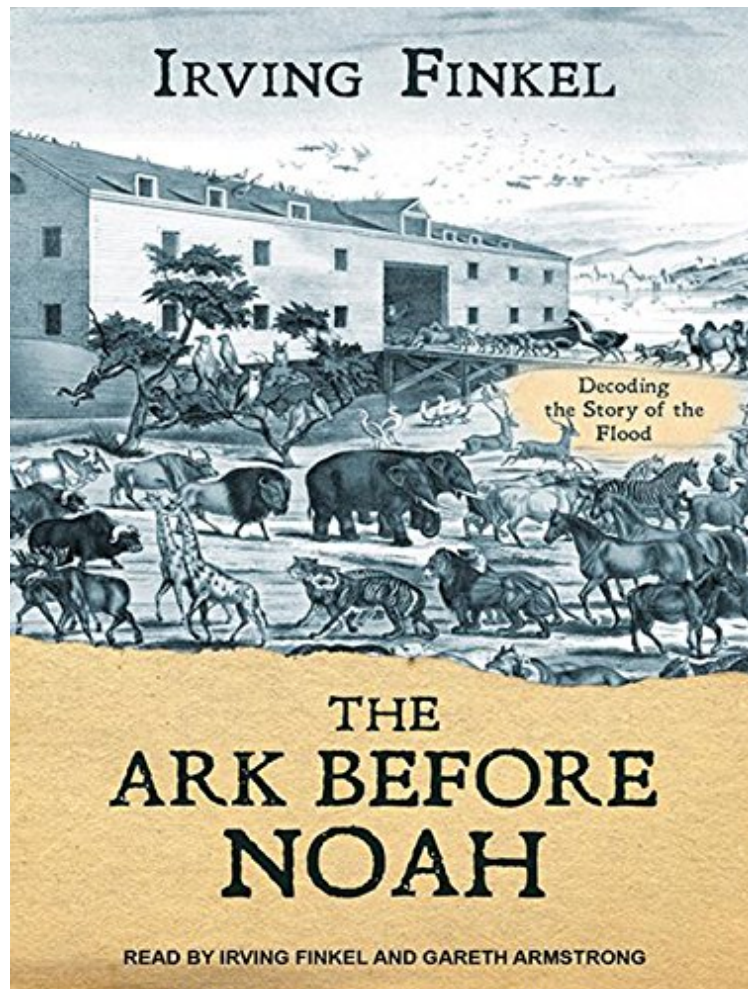


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The Ark Before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood

Irving Finkel

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Irving Finkel : The Ark Before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Ark Before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood:

65 of 66 people found the following review helpful. Eminently readable and refreshingly personal account. By Jim Palmer Reading "The Ark Before Noah" makes you feel like you're in a comfortable armchair in a book-lined study. There's a brandy snifter in your hand, and you're listening to one of the most charming raconteurs you can imagine. He's spinning a yarn so compellingly and amusingly that, almost against your will, you're becoming interested in a topic about which you'd never before cared. The vast majority of humankind has no clue what cuneiform writing is. But the man in the comfy chair opposite yours, Dr. Irving Finkel, Assistant Keeper of Ancient Mesopotamian Scripts at the British Museum, would like to change that. Ostensibly, this book is about a millennia-old slab of clay with some wedge-shaped writing on it and what it reveals: a Primordial Flood story unlike any other. As Finkel informs us, there

are plenty of other Babylonian cuneiform tablets in the British Museum and elsewhere with bits and pieces of Flood narratives (twelve, if memory serves). But this one was unique. Not only does it give precise instructions and dimensions for building a giant round boat (surprising enough in and of itself), it also contained the phrase "the animals entered the ark two by two"--a phrasing not found in any other Babylonian Flood narratives, but one which DOES occur in the Hebrew Bible. Now, were this book only about this tablet, it would be fascinating enough. But "The Ark Before Noah" is much more than that. "The Ark Before Noah" is a love story, an account of the lifelong romance between Dr. Finkel and cuneiform writing. Not only is it the oldest form of human writing known of, it's also, as Dr. Finkel informs us, far and away the most fun--a cryptographical challenge for the nimblest of brains. Woven through the story of the Ark Tablet is a chatty, witty, humane, and at times very funny memoir of a life spent deciphering these baffling indentations in once-wet mud. It's also a marvelous introductory history to the discipline of Assyriology itself. But it goes beyond that. One of Dr. Finkel's many gifts is to be able to see behind the inscriptions, and recognize the very human people who made them. The millennia between us and them notwithstanding, they were, he points out, people precisely like us. They struggled with the same dilemmas, had the same worries and concerns, and felt the same emotions. And, using our shared humanity across the millennia as a point of departure, he asks some much larger questions about the Bible: who wrote it? When? Why? And why would its anonymous writers or compilers, forcibly exiled in Babylon, have included stories cribbed from their pagan oppressors in their own holy book? Dr. Finkel has pulled off a rare feat: a lucidly scholarly, readable, personal, and personable book about a subject which, in the hands of the wrong writer, would be as boring as watching paint dry--but which, in his telling, becomes mesmerizing. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Fascinating reading. I loved it!! By Frances E. Barrack Amazing book about the most ancient formation of the earth, which began events leading to the Biblical story of Noah's flood. This book shows how Noah's Ark could have been made using the same methods modern southern Iraqis use to make their coracles, actually making them from the tough reeds that grow in their swamps, and using a method whose beginnings have been long lost in the shadows of time. Our very Earth in her young years once held extremely powerful oceans moving swiftly across shallow pieces of land so that huge seas met and joined together with a speed and horrible fierceness unknown today. As these huge seas merged, their dense, heavy weight created vast hollows where the newly formed oceans began to put extreme pressure on the land under them. Then came a harsh ripping melee of sound, as even more water was torn from the very bowels of the Earth, herself. And on top of all this horrific noise and confusion merrily bobbed Noah's little craft, his Ark, which this writer thinks could have been made from the reeds that still grow in southern Iraq. Indeed, pictures are included which show that the writer and a crew did indeed build a rather large coracle, although much smaller than Noah's due to financial concerns, but it was quite large enough to prove the point that Noah's ark could have been made from those reeds and still been strong enough to hold a large number of rather large animals. I absolutely loved this book!! I found it so novel and exciting to read that I want to say, "Forgive me, Dr. Finkel, if I got it wrong above. But I loved your book so much that I will read it over and over until I can get it right in my sleep." Fascinating reading!!! 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Highly recommended. By Michael Settle "The Ark Before Noah" is one of the most important resources regarding the background underlying the Noahic flood story in the Bible. Irving Finkel is the one of the world's foremost experts in deciphering cuneiform. The book relates an ancient inscription which literally walked into the British Museum which Finkel translated. It turns out to be one of the most ancient flood tales ever discovered- written hundreds of years before the Genesis narrative. The most intriguing part of the book is when the author (who has read cuneiform inscriptions daily for the past 40 years) posits how the biblical material utilized and incorporated these older stories and traditions and in what circumstances they came be included in the Hebrew Scriptures. Despite the rigorous academic nature of the material, "The Ark Before Noah" is remarkably readable. Highly recommended.

Since the Victorian period, it has been understood that the story of Noah, iconic in the Book of Genesis, and a central motif in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, derives from a much older story that existed centuries before in ancient Babylon. But the relationship between the Babylonian and biblical traditions was shrouded in mystery. Then, in 2009, Irving Finkel, a curator at the British Museum and a world authority on ancient Mesopotamia, found himself playing detective when a member of the public arrived at the museum with an intriguing cuneiform tablet from a family collection. Not only did the tablet reveal a new version of the Babylonian Flood Story; the ancient poet described the size and completely unexpected shape of the ark, and gave detailed boat building specifications. Decoding this ancient message wedge by cuneiform wedge, Dr. Finkel discovered where the Babylonians believed the ark came to rest and developed a new explanation of how the old story ultimately found its way into the Bible. In *The Ark Before Noah*, Dr. Finkel takes us on an adventurous voyage of discovery, opening the door to an enthralling world of ancient voices and new meanings.

"[Finkel's] conclusions will send ripples into the world of creationism and among ark hunters." ---Guardian About the Author Irving Finkel is assistant keeper of ancient Mesopotamian script, languages, and cultures at the British Museum. He is the curator in charge of cuneiform inscriptions on tablets of clay from ancient Mesopotamia, of which

the Middle East Department has the largest collection of any modern museum. Irving is the author of several academic articles and books on ancient Babylon. Irving Finkel is assistant keeper of ancient Mesopotamian script, languages, and cultures at the British Museum. He is the curator in charge of cuneiform inscriptions on tablets of clay from ancient Mesopotamia, of which the Middle East Department has the largest collection of any modern museum. Irving is the author of several academic articles and books on ancient Babylon. Gareth Armstrong is an experienced actor and voice artist. In addition to performing with the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Globe, in the West End, and major regional theaters in the United Kingdom, he has toured over sixty countries worldwide with his solo performances and drama workshops. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Chapter Three Words and People I have been happily reading cuneiform tablets every day now for about forty-five years. (As Arlo Guthrie would say: Im not proud. Or tired. I could read them for another forty-five years.) During such prolonged exposure an impression gradually but unavoidably begins to take shape about the long-dead individuals who actually wrote these documents. We can handle their handiwork and read their words and ideas, but, I find myself asking, can one grasp at identity within these crowds of ghostly people for whom, as the poet put it, dust was their sustenance and clay their food? The question finally crystallises into a single, and I think important, problem: were ancient Mesopotamians like us or not? Scholars and historians like to stress the remoteness of ancient culture, and there is an unspoken consensus that the greater the distance from us in time the scainter the traces of recognisable kinship. As a result of this outlook the past comes to confer a sort of cardboardisation on our predecessors, whose rigidity increases exponentially in jumps the further back you go in time. As a result the Victorians seem to have lived exclusively in a flurry about sexual intercourse; the Romans worried all day about toilets and under-floor heating, and the Egyptians walked about in profile with their hands in front of them pondering funerary arrangements, the ultimate men of cardboard. And before all these were the cavemen, grunting or painting, reminiscing wistfully about life back up in the trees. As a result of this tacit process Antiquity, and to some extent all pre-modern time, is led to populate itself with shallow and spineless puppets, denuded of complexity or corruption and all the other characteristics that we take for granted in our fellow man, which we comfortably describe as human. It is easiest and perhaps also comforting to believe that we, now, are the real human beings, and those who came before us were less advanced, less evolved and very probably less intelligent; they were certainly not individuals whom we would recognise, in different garb, as typical passengers on the bus home. After decades among the tablets I have become very doubtful that this wall of detachment from individuals who come out of the past is appropriate. We are, for one thing, talking only of the last five thousand years, a mere dollop in Time terms, in which snail processes like evolution or biological development have no measurable part. Nebuchadnezzar II ruled at Babylon from 605-562 bc, ascending to the throne 2,618 years before this book was brought into being. How can one actually visualise that interval of time clearly in order to bring the ancient king closer? If thirty-five individuals in a line live for seventy-five years each in historical sequence, the result is a straight run of 2,625 years. Thus a chain like a cinema queue of no more than thirty-five cradle-to-grave lives divides us from people who lived and breathed when Nebuchadnezzar was king. This is not, after all, unimaginable remoteness in time past. And we can hardly flatter ourselves that we are any more intelligent than, say, Babylonians who practised mathematical astronomy for a living. There were Mesopotamian geniuses and Mesopotamian numbskulls walking about at the same time. This issue, whether ancient writers can be accessible and familiar as human beings, affects very seriously how we interpret their writings. I am reluctant to settle for the faraway and unattainable nature of the ancient Mesopotamian mind, the remoteness of which has often been stressed, particularly with regard to religion. In my view humankind shares a common form of starting software which is merely given a veneer by local characteristics and traditions, and I argue that this applies to the ancient populations of the Middle East exactly as it does to the world today. The environment in which an individual exists will contribute formative, possibly dominating pressures; the more enclosed the community the more conformist the individual will be, but, evaluated from a broad perspective, such differences are largely cosmetic, social and in some sense superficial. Take *Pride and Prejudice*. In their outer wrapping, the characters within it do look a bit odd from a very contemporary perspective, with their social mannerisms, codes of behaviour and religious practice, but their motives, behaviour and humanity are in every way familiar. So it must be as one vaults backwards in time, and so it is with Shakespeare and Chaucer, and the Vindolanda tablets in demotic Latin, and Aristophanes, and there we are, bc already. One species in myriad disguises. In my estimation the old cuneiform writers have to be inspected with the right end of the telescope, the one that brings them closer. If tablet writings are to provide an answer to the question of how accessible Mesopotamians were, it must be granted, of course, that they will always give incomplete information. Far from everyone had a voice. And then a high proportion of our cuneiform documents is official, formulaic and hidebound by tradition, rarely innovative and often manipulative. Assyrian military campaigns, for example, are portrayed on stately prisms of clay as a matter of unimpeded triumph, with huge booty and minimal loss of Assyrian life; such accounts require the same necessary reading between the lines that historians must apply to modern journalism. The most informative documents will be those of the everyday world, which, ought to be impulsive, informal and unselfconscious in comparison. There are two cuneiform categories among these which are undoubtedly the most helpful from this point of view: letters and proverbs. Huge numbers of private letters survive, for they come in a particularly durable, fit-in-the-hand size and are not as readily broken as larger

tablets. These letters, often exchanged by merchants who were irritated with one another about slow delivery or overdue payment, sometimes allow us to eavesdrop. Flattery (I am so worried about you! !) alternates with irony (Are you not my brother? spiced with?), wheedling or threats, and the timeless claim that the letter is in the post occurs endlessly : I have already sent you my tablet! Letters can give us a remarkable picture of people going about their lives, preoccupied with money and mortgages, worried about business, sickness or the lack of a son. From our over-the-shoulder vantage point can come a moment of closeness to an individual, or a sense of fellowship with the harassed or crafty person at the other end. How did cuneiform letters function? The operation was cumbersome and of a slower-paced world. Letters despatched to colleague or foe usually went to a different town as otherwise it would have been simpler to go and talk. The message had to be dictated to a trained scribe, carried from A to B, and read aloud by the recipients own scribe when it finally arrived. This is explicit from the words that open almost every example: To So-and-so speak! Thus says So-and-so . . . and in the actual Akkadian word for letter, u-ne-dukku, loaned from the Sumerian u- ne-dug, say to him! Since fluent letter dictation is beyond most people today I think we must imagine a merchant starting off, Tell that cheat . . .; no, wait a minute; May the Sun God bless you etc. ha! curse more like . . . o.k. o.k.; here we go: When I saw your tablet . . . The scribe, experienced and patient on a stool, would jot down the main points as they emerged and then produce a finished letter on a proper-looking tablet. Outside on a wall it would dry in the warm air, and then go into a runners post-bag for delivery. The sender knows the background: usually we dont. He gets his answer: again, usually we dont. Those who read other peoples correspondence must harvest everything possible: spelling, word forms, grammar and idiom, sign use and handwriting. Squeezing the sponge involves more than the extraction of clear facts; also crucial is inferring, with varying degrees of probability, a good deal more: What led to the letter; what light might it throw on trade, social conditions, crime and immorality, not to mention the person of the writer himself? Such inferences derive from knowledge of contemporary documents seasoned with common sense. There is an additional useful factor, the Sherlock Holmes principle that, we are told, he wrote up in a magazine called *The Book of Life*: From a drop of water, said the writer, a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other. A. Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet* In my experience, this Niagara principle is of considerable value to the Assyriologist. A good case of this is Babylonian surgery. References to surgical practice of any kind are rare in the medical texts. Cataracts were dealt with using a knife and there is a text where infection is released from the chest cavity by some kind of inter-rib incision. But, in comparison with Egyptian medicine across the sands where the Edwin Smith surgical papyrus gives astonishing procedural treatments for injuries and wounds, Babylonian doctors do not measure up. This seems curious. The mighty Assyrian army was constantly in the field. A deterrent clause in an Assyrian political treaty focuses on the reality of battle wounds, with a glimpse of emergency treatment, possibly even self-applied: If your enemy stabs you, let there be a lack of honey, oil, ginger or cedar resin to apply to your wounds! Over the centuries there must have been a very considerable inherited, practical, medical field knowledge: staunching of blood loss, extracting arrows, stitching wounds, and emergency amputations with hot pitch; also important was judging whether a wounded soldier was even worth the saving; all this stands to reason. None of our known therapeutic texts sheds light on this, however. So we can assume either that all medical lore in the army was transmitted, hands-on from expert to tyro, without recourse to written form, or that no such text happens to have come to light. In my understanding it is the last explanation which is true. Going back to the Niagara principle, an important scribe in the Assyrian capital at Assur once drew up a catalogue of medical compositions available in a library there. He included a section with the following tantalisingly incomplete titles, quoted by their first line: If a man, whether by sword or slingstone . . . If a man . . . in front of a ship. These lost tablets must have dealt not with diseases or demons but, compellingly, with injuries: military, industrial or caused by a goring ox. They give us a glimpse of what was once written down about wounds, just as happened in ancient Egypt. One day I shall find those tablets. Proverbs, and the wisdom literature that derives from them, come in both Sumerian and Akkadian, and pithy, sardonic and cynical mots seem to flow naturally in Sumerian. Dont laugh with a girl if she is married: slander is powerful is a rueful example. The word for virgin, kiskilla, literally means pure place, and girls at the beginning of history were most definitely supposed to be a virgin on marriage. One Babylonian rou, arraigned before a judge in about 1800 bc, testified, I swear that I did not have intercourse with her, that my penis did not enter her vagina; not, one reflects, the last time someone has got off on that technicality. Mesopotamians were always fearful of slander; it was one of their things, and they called it evil finger-pointing in the street, but victims could always toss painted clay tongues inscribed with power words into the river as a remedy. King Esarhaddon himself once reflected in a seventh-century letter from Nineveh, The oral proverb says: In court the word of a sinful woman prevails over her husbands, while a classic of Babylonian wisdom literature advised, Do not love, sir, do not love. Woman is a pitfall a pitfall, a hole, a ditch. Woman is a sharp iron dagger that cuts a mans throat. One can pass a pleasant hour reflecting on such statements. What do we know about the scribes themselves? Unfortunately, not a great deal is known about the scribes themselves. At all periods they were almost invariably male. It is likely that there were scribal families, and that access to formal schooling was limited to such circles. To become a scribe in Mesopotamia required exhaustive training, as we can see from lots of surviving old clay schoolbooks, especially from the Old Babylonian, about 1700 bc, and Neo-Babylonian periods, 500 bc. There is even

an entertaining cycle of stories in Sumerian about what happened in the classroom, which are as much fun to read now as they must have been originally. Making a proper tablet (which is not so simple!) was followed by a strict diet of wedges, signs, proper names, dictionary texts, literature, maths, spelling and model contracts. This training gave a scribal family boy his basic grounding. At this stage he could technically spell and write whatever he wanted, and perhaps the majority would find work as commercial scribes, sitting at the city gate and taking on all comers who needed a bit of writing done when they were selling some land or marrying off a daughter. Graduate students, in turn, would specialise in their chosen field; an apprentice architect would study advanced maths, weight systems (also not so simple!) and how to make things stay up once they were put up, while novice diviners would learn to expound each corner and wrinkle of a diseased sheep's liver. Very often, it seems, such professionals were sworn to secrecy in the process. Small notations bring the Mesopotamian uparru, or tablet writer, even closer. Library and scientific texts sometimes have a line along the top edge in easy-to-miss, minute writing: At the word of My Lord and My Lady may this go well! Such an utterance for it was probably muttered more than once under the breath as well as inscribed is very understandable, for cuneiform mistakes had consequences: clay is an unforgiving medium and invisible correction almost impossible. Many a time a scribe, checking over his work, must have sighed wearily and started again from the top; erasures and errors that come through are, generally speaking, conspicuously uncommon. Sometimes, however, a whole line gets omitted, the scribe making a diminutive x mark to indicate the point of omission and writing out the lost signs down the side from a point with another x. To avoid this problem, long or elaborate documents often marked every tenth line at the left side with a small ten sign, confirmed by a line total at the end, since it was as easy for a Babylonian eye to jump a line as it is for a modern copy-typists and checking aids were very helpful. Sometimes a worried scribe records that he has not seen all the text, or makes a note in similar tiny cuneiform signs to show that the tablet he was copying was broken. There are two degrees: hepi (it-was-broken), and hepi eu (a new it-was-broken). In principle the system worked like this. The scribe Aqra-lumur, seated in some institution, is copying out the text of an important tablet. There is a damaged passage that he cannot read with certainty, so he writes hepi (it-was-broken) where signs or wedges are abraded. The scribe who makes a copy of Aqra-lumurs tablet takes care to reproduce all cases where his predecessor wrote hepi. Thus is set in train a process of transmission whereby any number of scribes preserve as accurately as possible the situation first encountered by Aqra-lumur. Notations like this are revealing, for hepi (it-was-broken) is found in places where even we can tell what is missing, highlighting that the scribes task was to transmit old texts found precisely, without imposing himself or his ideas even when the restoration was self-evident. As this line of transmission proceeds it comes about that a subsequent tablet in the chain gets chipped or broken itself. This damage is, so-to-speak, new, and will be indicated by hepi eu (a new it-was-broken). Literary texts often concluded with a colophon that recorded the source of the text and the scribes name. With very venerable documents these successive colophons were all copied out, so a given tablet might have three of them, in chronological order. This very sketchy scribal picture for this is a big topic with sprawling evidence leads to a separate question: What was the level of literacy in society at large in, say, the first millennium bc? Nobody in ancient Mesopotamia ever stood on a street corner soap-box to advocate literacy for all, and, up until recently, Assyriologists have mostly taken it for granted that the ability to read and write was highly restricted in Mesopotamian society. (There is an attractive paradox in the construct of an age-old, highly literary culture in which hardly anyone at any particular time was in fact literate.) I have a suspicion that this evaluation derives ultimately from what King Assurbanipal had to say at home in seventh-century Nineveh. A special note at the end of many of his library tablets recorded boastfully that unlike the kings who preceded him he could even read inscriptions from before the Flood: Marduk, the sage of the gods, gave me wide understanding and broad perceptions as a gift. Nabu, the scribe of the universe, bestowed on me the acquisition of all his wisdom as a present. Ninurta and Nergal gave me physical fitness, manhood and unparalleled strength. I learnt the lore of the wise sage Adapa, the hidden secret, the whole of the scribal craft. I can discern celestial and terrestrial portents and deliberate in the assembly of the experts. I am able to discuss the series If the Liver is the Mirror Image of the Sky with capable scholars. I can solve convoluted reciprocals and calculations that do not come out evenly. I have read cunningly written text in Sumerian, dark Akkadian, the interpretation of which is difficult. I have examined stone inscriptions from before the flood, which are sealed, stopped up, mixed up. We know, in fact, that Assurbanipal was literate, for he nostalgically kept some of his own school texts, but is it justified to conclude from this statement that Assyrian kings otherwise were completely illiterate? For me it is impossible to credit that mighty Sennacherib, accompanying foreign potentates through the halls of his Nineveh Palace where the sculptures were inscribed with his name and achievements, would have been unable to explain a cluster of cuneiform signs on demand. Surely any king worth the name, pulled this way and that by advisors, technicians, diviners and what have you, would need, if only for self-protection, some cuneiform know-how. An educated monarch, moreover, would not do his own writing; there were staff to do all that. But there has been a direct overspill from Assurbanipals literary boast: if kings were usually illiterate, how much more so the great unwashed. This limited-literacy idea is probably compounded by the nature of the cuneiform discipline itself. Assyriologists today have to master absolute shelves of words, grammar and signs. Those who survive indoctrination often feel that the ability to read cuneiform can never be taken for granted in anyone

else, including the ancients. It is easy, however, to forget that in ancient Mesopotamia everyone already knew (a) the words and (b) the grammar of their own language, even if they were unaware that they knew such things. This left only the cuneiform signs to be mastered. The truth, as has been seen in more recent books, must be that many people knew how to read to some level, or, rather, to the level that they needed. Merchants were in charge of their own book-keeping; some son or nephew had to record all the contracts and loans, and commerce is a great motivator to book learning. It is inconceivable to me that all cuneiform writing was constrained in a professional, those-who-need-to-know box. The real situation to be envisaged is that within a large city there must have been very different levels of literacy. Very few individuals can ever have known all the rarest signs in the sign lists together with all their possible readings, but the number of signs needed to write a contract or a letter was, in comparison, very restricted; some 112 syllable signs and 57 ideograms to write Old Babylonian documents, while Old Assyrian merchants, or their wives, needed even less. Similarly modest was the range of signs needed to inscribe the palace walls of the Assyrians with triumphant accounts of conquest. A parallel might derive from facility in typing in the 1960s. Anyone could type with two fingers but few such would have called themselves a typist; certificated professionals at the other end of the spectrum who could do dazzling hundreds of words a minute most proudly would, while in between there was a wide range of ability. So it might well have been with sign recognition, many people having a little bit of writing. Probably lots of people knew signs that could spell their own name, as well as those for god, king and Babylon; these were, after all, used everywhere. Letter writers and contract drafters knew what they needed to know, professional men a good deal more, and so forth.