

Cuneiform Barrel-Cylinder

605-562 B.C.,

Neo-Babylonian, Babylon (Al-Ḥilla)

Clay

L: 9.6 cm, W: 4.4 cm

A clay barrel-cylinder, pierced at each end, and inscribed with nineteen lines of Akkadian reading:

I, Nebuchadnessar, king of Babylon, the son of Naboplassar, king of Babylon, have rebuilt Emah, the temple of the noble and lofty goddess Ninham on Babylon, I have put around it a strung terrace wall made of bitumen and burnt brick filled in with pure earth; O Ninmah, gracious mother, look with pleasure on it and may favour for me be established on your lips; may my seed widespread and may my offspring be prosperous and make my progeny successful.

The text records the rebuilding of the Emah, the great temple of the goddess Ninmah in Babylon. This is one of many documents recording the restoration works performed by king Nebuchadnezzar, which are also recorded in the Bible, Daniel 4:30:31. Clay cylinders such as this one were inscribed in cuneiform script, baked, and then buried into the foundations of buildings when they were built and restored. As in this example, these texts often recorded the restoration of structures in particular temples of the city.

Akkadian is the earliest documented Semitic language. It was spoken in ancient Mesopotamia from the third millennium B.C. until it was gradually replaced by Old Aramaic by the eighth century B.C.. It was written in cuneiform. Cuneiform is the logo-syllabic script used to write several languages between the early Bronze Age and the beginning of the Common Era. It was originally developed to write the Sumerian language of southern Mesopotamia, and is the earliest known writing system.

The archaeological site of Emar (modern Tell Meskene) is situated in the great bend of the mid-Euphrates. It ranks alongside Ugarit, Mari, and Ebla as one of the most important archaeological sites in Syria due to the number of cuneiform tablets excavated there. These texts, dating from the fourteenth century B.C. to the fall of Emar in 1187 B.C., reveal that Emar was an important Bronze Age trade centre due to its position between Upper Mesopotamia and Anatolia-Syria. Most of the tablets from this site, unlike those from other cities, are private rather than royal or official documents. These documents include private transactions, judicial records, real estate dealings, marriages, last wills, and formal adoptions.

Literature:

Egyptian, Greek and Roman Antiquities, Sotheby's, London, 4 July 1932, Lot 143.

Fine books and manuscripts from the library of the late Alan G. Thomas, Sotheby's, London, 21 June 1993, Lot 1