

certified by a number of witnesses, the man who had possession of the property was put to death as a thief. In view of these very stringent laws, it was extremely important that anyone securing any kind of property should have a cuneiform tablet certifying to his purchase of it. The result of this was that writing was perhaps more important in those days than it is today and thousands of tablets dealing with every possible aspect of life show us what a part it played in the lives of those people.

Twenty-seven languages have been found written in cuneiform writing. The rather permanent nature of the writing, the great amount which could be written on a comparatively small surface and the ease of the preservation or transportation of the small tablets upon which it might be written contributed to its spread. When we consider how very much it was used over so many centuries, we are amazed to discover what an extremely complicated system it was. The Babylonian cuneiform has at least a thousand signs which occur in it, and perhaps two or three other thousand which occur very rarely. About three hundred signs occur quite frequently so that if one is to read with much fluency, one must know at least these three hundred signs. The signs assumed somewhat different form during the three principal periods of Babylonian history and the three forms which we call the Old Babylonian, the Assyrian and the New Babylonian differ from one another about as much as Greek letters differ from English letters. A few signs have only one meaning and always mean the same thing, but this is rare. Most of them have from two to twenty meanings which may be syllables or whole words or ideas. One must tell from the context which meaning a sign has in a particular place. It is very rare that any method is used of separating words. A line may contain from two to seven words. The end of a line almost always coincides with the end of a word, but within the line there is no way to tell where one word ends and another begins.