

Digital Adventure to the History and Research of the Ancient Middle East

Materials from the digital exhibition



Photos from the *Exploring the Ancient Near East* -exhibition. Janna Lund ja Jasmin Ruotsalainen.

Table of Contents

Digital adventure to the history and research of ancient Near East	3
Explore the ancient Near East!	4
Ancient Near Eastern Empires	6
Neo-Assyrian Empire 911–609 BCE	7
Neo-Babylonian Empire 626–539 BCE	7
Achaemenid Persian Empire 550–330 BCE.....	7
Babylonian mathematics	8
Discover the origins and history of the development of writing!.....	9
Enheduanna - the First Known Author	10
Finnish researchers and explorers in the Near East	11
Georg August Wallin and Egyptomania	12
Ahatabu’s Burial Stele	13
Karl Fredrik Eneberg exploring the ancient city of Nineveh	14
The Mythical Nineveh - Capital of Ancient Assyria	16
Hilma Granqvist and Orientalism	16
Objects Tell Stories.....	18
Clay tablets and cuneiform writing.....	18
King Nebuchadnezzar II's clay cylinder and the provenance of artifacts	20
Egyptian burial coffin and the fragile legacy of the Ancient Near East	21
UNESCO – International cooperation for the protection of cultural heritage.....	22
Current research and studying	23
Centre of Excellence in Ancient Near Eastern Empires and studying in the University of Helsinki	23
Examples of other research projects	24
Helpful links.....	25

Digital adventure to the history and research of ancient Near East

This educational package includes the contents of the Digital Adventure to the History and Research of the Ancient Middle East virtual exhibition. In cooperation with the University of Helsinki's Centre of Excellence in Ancient Near Eastern Empires, the National Museum of Finland and the Museum of Central Finland, the digital exhibition presents the contents of the exhibition, which was carried out in 2022.

Finnish research in the ancient Middle East has a long tradition, and the region has fascinated researchers and explorers for a long time. The history of the ancient Middle East, as well as research spanning more than a hundred years, were presented in collaboration with the University of Helsinki's Ancient Middle Eastern Empires Centre of Excellence, the National Museum of Finland and the Museum of Central Finland in 2022 in the exhibition Expeditions to the Ancient Middle East. In the virtual exhibition, you can explore the contents of the exhibition in five different sections: Objects tell stories, Finnish researchers and explorers in the Middle East, Explore the ancient Middle East!, Contemporary research and studies, and Photo Gallery. A link to the virtual exhibition can be found in the links and tips section of this educational package.

The exhibition presents the work started by Finnish explorers and researchers in the 19th century with the help of their stories and the objects they brought with them from their travels. The exhibition, which was exhibited at the National Museum and the Museum of Central Finland, brought together for the first time items belonging to Finnish museum collections from the Middle East. The collections were originally collected from the perspective of European research, so the objects tell not only the history of their original region, but also how the Middle East has been seen in Europe. They also tell the history of Finnish Middle Eastern research since the 19th century.

The aim of the exhibition is to present the history of the region and the history of Finnish Middle Eastern research as well as key themes and challenges related to cultural heritage such

as the history of ownership, illegal trade of antiquities, impact of current land use and construction, and the traces left by wars and conflicts.

Explore the ancient Near East!

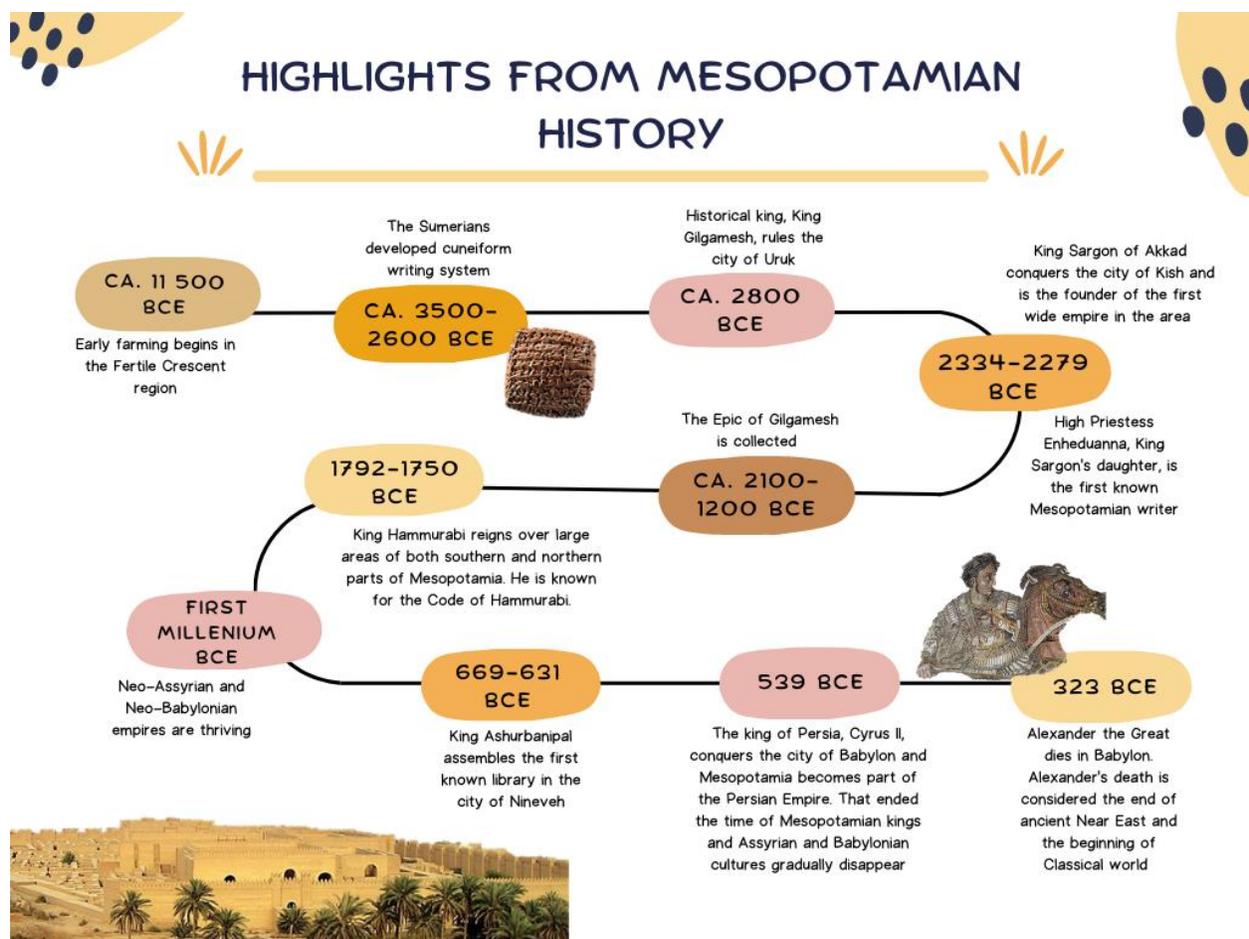
The Ancient Near East is the birthplace of agriculture, great empires, cities, sciences, arts, mathematics, astronomy, and early writing system.

The present-day Near East is the cradle of the world's oldest and largest historical empires. It is also an area greatly influenced by Western imperialism ideologies and upheavals since the 19th century. The Western perspective is even evident in the region's name: instead of referring to it as West Asia, we now commonly use the term "Near East." This name began to be used in geopolitical discussions in the early 1900s. Historically, the region has been referred to as al-Mashriq in Arabic, meaning "the East," in contrast to the African part of the Arab world, known as al-Maghrib, meaning "the West."

Numerous important inventions have emerged from the Near East. It is where agriculture and sedentary lifestyles, as well as cities and the earliest major empires, developed. The Near East is known for having the earliest writing systems, monetary systems, coins, and astronomy. We have come to understand these through archaeological remains and historical documents. As people moved from one area to another, ideas, knowledge, and science also spread. In the Near East, temples and royal palaces served as centers of scientific activity thousands of years before the Common Era. Within extensive networks of scholars, texts and knowledge crossed cultural and even political borders. Some rulers of ancient Near East actively gathered knowledge; when they conquered a new place, they ordered scientific writings from city libraries and archives to be taken to the royal palace.

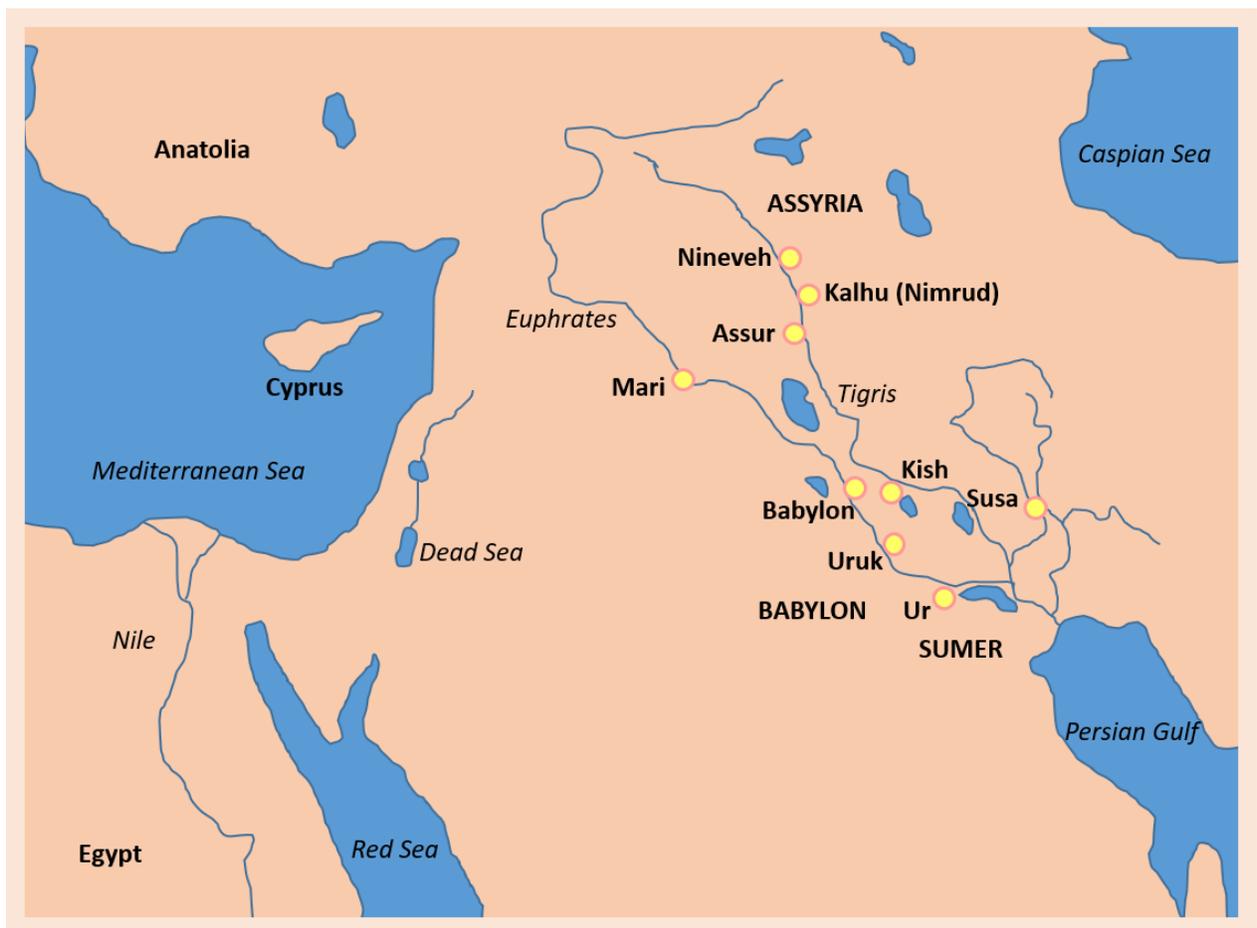
Babylon had a long tradition of mathematics and astronomy research spanning thousands of years. Babylonian discoveries and research have influenced Persian, Egyptian, and Greek studies up to the present day. The division of an hour into 60 minutes and a circle into 360

degrees originated in Babylon. The Babylonian calendar was based on the movements of the moon, and the observation of celestial bodies was important for understanding the intentions of the gods as well as for timing important agricultural activities. Numerous clay tablets with precise observations of celestial events over extended periods have been found in Babylon. The world's oldest strategic board games have also been discovered in the current Near East region. Originally, these games were not just entertainment but were also used for divination and exploring the afterlife.



Ancient Near Eastern Empires

During the first millennium BCE, three major empires exerted their influence in the Near East: the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires. These empires controlled vast territories ranging from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf, and at their peak, even extending to India and the Danube. Many of their significant cities were located in the vicinity of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. The palaces in their respective capitals were ruled by a tight-knit elite, whose power was considered to be ordained by the gods. However, outside the cities, among the nomadic populations of the steppes and deserts, the impact of local administrations was notable.



Neo-Assyrian Empire 911–609 BCE

The core territory of the Neo-Assyrian Empire was located around the cities of Assur, Nineveh, and the site known today as Nimrud. The kings acted as representatives of the god Assur on Earth, and sought to expand the empire in his honor. At its greatest extent, the empire stretched from Egypt to the Persian Gulf and encompassed various peoples, such as the Arameans, Urartians, Elamites, and Syrian-Luwians. However, Assyrian religion was not forcibly imposed, and the conquered nations formed a multi-lingual and multi-cultural empire.

Neo-Babylonian Empire 626–539 BCE

The kings of Babylon, together with the Medes, conquered the heartland of Assyria. Despite occasional political instability, the Neo-Babylonian Empire thrived economically as the population grew. War spoils were used for large-scale construction projects, such as the creation of irrigation canals to promote agriculture and trade. Cultivated lands were allocated to immigrants who, in turn, paid taxes and participated in military service.

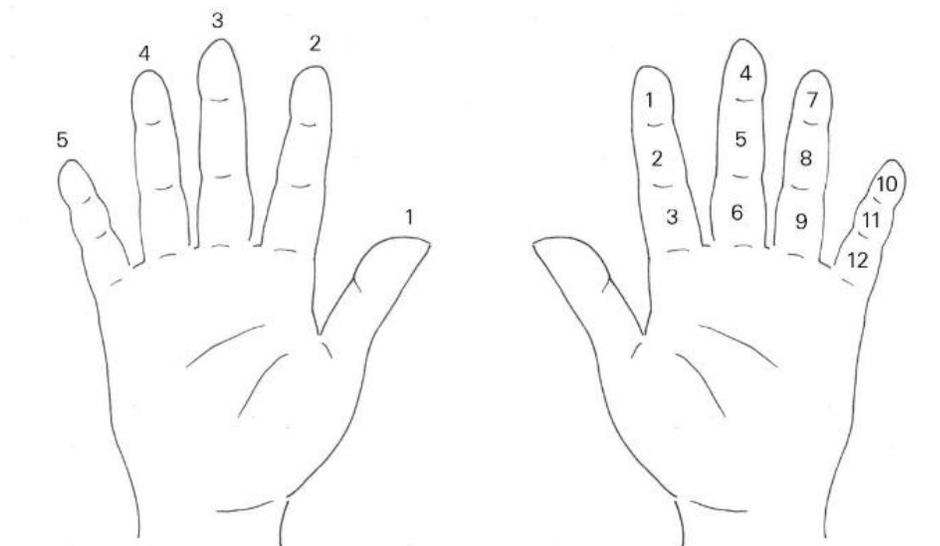
Achaemenid Persian Empire 550–330 BCE

Anshan, a small kingdom in the present-day region of Iran, was conquered by King Cyrus II, who then went on to subdue the Babylonian Empire and regions including Anatolia, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan. The successors of Cyrus II continued their conquests as far as the Danube. The Persian Empire was the largest of the preceding empires in the Middle East and required extensive road and postal networks for its functioning. The gardens built in cities and palaces not only pleased the eye but also spoke of the influence and vitality of their creators. The origin of the word "paradise" can be traced back to these gardens.

Babylonian mathematics

Babylonian mathematics was not based on counting with ten fingers, but relied on the joints of the fingers, which were counted using the thumb. Each of the four fingers has three joints, totaling twelve. If you keep track of each set of twelve using the five fingers of the other hand, the total becomes sixty. That's why this numeral system is called sexagesimal, based on the number sixty, instead of decimal. In Mesopotamia, all calculations (time, lengths, areas, volumes) were based on units divisible by sixty. This is still reflected in our modern time system, where hours are divided into two sets of twelve, which further consist of sixty minutes composed of sixty seconds each. The base-60 system is also used in calculations involving angles and coordinates.

Although the number zero was not yet in use among the Mesopotamians, their mathematics was still advanced. Proper timing of agricultural phases with the help of astronomy and the architectural calculations required for the construction of temples and palaces demanded proficiency in complex mathematical theorems. Test for yourself how counting can be done using the thumb and the joints of the fingers!



Discover the origins and history of the development of writing!

Humans have been intrigued by the question of where, why, and when writing was developed. There is no definitive answer to this. Alongside the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, cuneiform writing is the world's oldest known writing system that can be deciphered. The earliest Mesopotamian clay tablets containing pictorial script date back to the Late Uruk period, around 3300 BCE. The earliest texts are administrative in nature and deal with the distribution of resources among temple personnel. However, early symbol systems are known to have existed even in the Paleolithic or early Stone Age. Later, during the Neolithic or later Stone Age, more complex symbol systems with connections to spoken language emerged. Since these languages are unknown and unreadable, they are referred to as proto-writing. Examples of such systems include the Vinča-Turdaş culture in the Danube Valley and the Jiahu culture in China, dating back to around 6600 BCE. These systems testify that the invention of writing was not a singular flash of insight in human history but rather the result of a long and intricate process.

Cuneiform script acquired its wedge-like appearance around 2600 BCE when Sumerian scribes, instead of drawing or scratching the signs, began impressing them onto clay tablets with a reed stylus (Latin: *cuneus*). The tip of this reed pen was cut diagonally into a triangular shape, allowing for the formation of more complex signs derived from four basic impressions. This enabled the writing of smaller-sized signs neatly and swiftly. The adoption of this new writing technique left a lasting impact on the appearance of the signs, gradually distancing them from their original pictographic form.

In cuneiform writing, signs can serve different functions: Approximately 60-100 signs can be used as syllabic signs, forming actual words and names. For example, the signs A and ŠUR4 can combine to form the name Assur. Most signs can be used as logographic signs, where a single sign or a combination of signs represents concepts such as writing, seeing, temple, water, or wisdom. Many logograms have multiple meanings and can refer to several different concepts, requiring the intended meaning to be inferred from the context. Cuneiform writing was considered a craft skill taught through apprenticeship, often within the same family. Over time, this led to the emergence of prestigious scribal families.

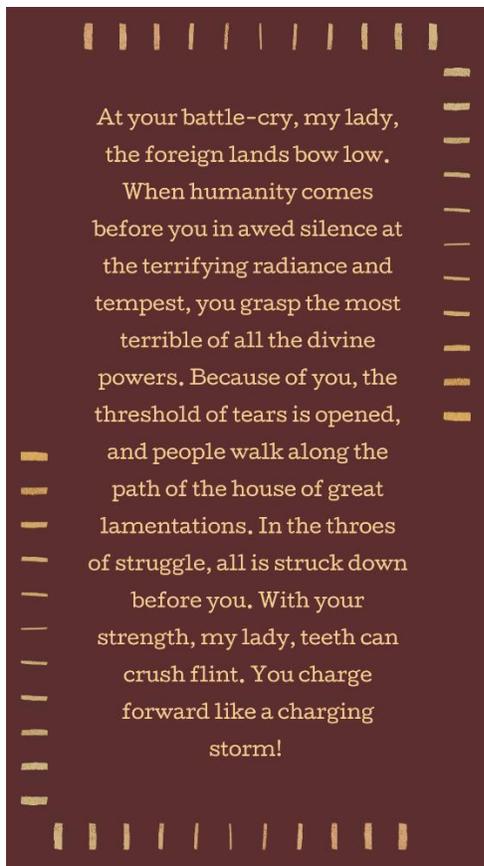
Cuneiform script was used to write various languages, including Sumerian, Akkadian, and Old Persian. In addition to clay tablets, texts were written on clay prisms, clay nails, and reliefs adorning palace walls.



An example of clay tablet. This tablet is a receipt for purchasing dates (ca. 1750 BCE). Photo: Finna.fi. The Finnish Heritage Agency: Archaeology collection.

[Enheduanna - the First Known Author](#)

Enheduanna, the daughter of Akkadian king Sargon, is the first known author and scribe. Enheduanna served as the high priestess of the moon god Nanna in the city of Ur, with the purpose of bridging Akkadian and Sumerian traditions in this esteemed religious and political role. She sought the same unity in her literary works, a lion's share of which was dedicated to Inanna, the Akkadian counterpart of the Sumerian goddess Ishtar. As the high priestess, Enheduanna acted as the embodiment of the goddess Ningal, the wife of Nanna.



Excerpt from Enheduanna's Praise to the Goddess Inanna.

Finnish researchers and explorers in the Near East

Finnish explorers and researchers have approached ancient Near East through various fields such as linguistics, textual studies, anthropology, social sciences, and archaeology. The individuals and their stories highlighted in the exhibition also depict broader themes of their time and the growing interest in ancient Middle East during the 19th century. Notable Finnish scholars of the Middle East have included Karl Fredrik Eneberg, who specialized in cuneiform scripts, and Georg August Wallin, who conducted research expeditions in Islamic culture and Egypt. Anthropologist Hilma Granqvist, on the other hand, studied the lives of local women in Palestine.

Georg August Wallin and Egyptomania

The history of the Near East has been studied in Finland for a long time. Georg August Wallin, born in Åland, was one of the earliest and most renowned explorers of the Middle East from the current territory of Finland. In the 1840s, he conducted three research expeditions to the Middle East, spending a total of six years exploring a vast area from Egypt to Central Asia. Wallin also acquired numerous artifacts during his travels and sent them back to Finland. One of the items he sent was a coffin from ancient Egypt, which he obtained in Cairo in 1848. You can read more about this coffin and the fragile cultural heritage of the ancient Near East in the "Objects Tell Stories" section!

Besides researchers, seafarers also brought Egyptian artifacts to Finland from their voyages. Interest in Egypt and its cultural treasures began in Europe in the 18th century and grew during the 19th century due to research and exploration expeditions. Europe's fascination with Egypt was so strong that it was referred to as "Egyptomania." This fascination also influenced Finland, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, impacting architecture, literature, fashion, and advertising. For instance, elements of Egyptian architecture can be seen in the side entrances of the main stairs of the Finnish Parliament House. Mika Waltari's novel "The Egyptian" (1945), set in ancient Egypt, quickly became an international success, translated into 41 languages. Waltari's typewriter is on display in the core exhibition "The Story of Finland" at the National Museum of Finland. Egyptian imagery and names were used to promote luxurious products such as cosmetics, fabrics, sweets, and cigars.

The enormous European interest in buying ancient Egyptian objects led to the production of modern replicas. These were not necessarily considered forgeries, as their modern origin was openly known. Nonetheless, these replicas were popular as souvenirs, just like they are for tourists today.



Photo: finna.fi. Organization: The Finnish Heritage Agency. Collection: Historical Image Collection.
Originally a fusain/charcoal drawing by C. Cajander.

Ahatabu's Burial Stele

The "Stele of Berlin," also known as the burial stela, was discovered in the necropolis of Sakkara, Memphis, in 1877. Made of limestone, the original stele was destroyed during World War II, but its mold and plaster cast still exist, and the stele in the exhibition was made based on the original plaster cast.

The stele is dedicated to a woman named Ahatabu and her husband Abah. Through the inscription on this commemorative stele, commissioned by their son Absal, researchers have been able to learn about this immigrant woman in Persian-era Egypt. Ahatabu was apparently the daughter of a Jewish immigrant soldier. At the time of the inscription in 482 BCE, Persians had ruled Egypt for about 40 years, so it is highly possible that Ahatabu was born outside Egypt and came there as a child with her father Adijan.

The stele also depicts a scene related to Egyptian death rituals or burial ceremonies, where the god of the afterlife, Osiris, sits on his throne judging the deceased, with the goddesses Isis or Hathor and Nephthys behind him. Above the deities is a winged sun disk. Ahatabu and Abah are also shown approaching Osiris with outstretched hands in the image.



Copy of the Berlin Stele. Photo: Janna Lund.

[Karl Fredrik Eneberg exploring the ancient city of Nineveh](#)

The reason for the growing enthusiasm to explore the past of the ancient Middle East was the colonial motives of the West, the development of museums, and the professionalization of archaeology. Research was dominated by French and British explorers, but other Europeans soon followed. Early research often focused on spectacular sites linked to Bible, Biblical places and events. Archaeological finds were excavated from the ruins of ancient cities of Persepolis, Nimrud, Babylon, and Nineveh, which were taken to the collections of researchers' homelands.

Born in Närpes, researcher Karl Fredrik Eneberg studied Oriental languages in Helsinki, St. Petersburg, Kiel and Leipzig in the 1860s and 1870s. With the help of a scholarship from the

Imperial Alexander University (now the University of Helsinki), he studied cuneiform writing and Akkadian and Sumerian in Paris. In February 1876, Eneberg set out on an expedition towards Nineveh, along with George Smith, an assyriologist known for his interpretation of the Epic of Gilgamesh. Nineveh was one of the ancient Assyrian capitals that was known for its biblical references, palaces, and cuneiform writings. Eneberg planned to bring antiquities from Nineveh to Helsinki for research.

The dream of a young scholar, a journey to the ruins of Nineveh, began in London in February 1876 with the research party of the famous assyriologist George Smith. In Aleppo, Eneberg resigned from Smith's party and traveled directly to the city of Mosul, next to Nineveh. Eneberg wrote in Mosul that he suffered from headaches, fatigue and homesickness. However, in his letters to his director Otto Donner, he enthusiastically describes the possibilities of studying the remnants and texts of ancient Assyrian culture:

"The longer I stay here, the more I want to organize the excavations myself. Of course, there are challenges. I am missing two important things: the permission of the authorities and money."

In mid-May, Eneberg's journal entries shortened. Eneberg describes burning heat and visit to the city of Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Sharrukin). A few days later, on May 24, 1876, only 35-year-old Eneberg was found dead in his room. The dream of the excavations never came true. He was buried in a Christian cemetery outside Mosul. Eneberg was missed by his fiancée, Minette Munck, who already sensed Eneberg's fate in her diary entry:

"What if he's dead? May God help me to live without my friend. Whether he is alive or not, I send him my greatest thanks for all the love that was often misunderstood but that brought light to my life. Blessed is he whom I love more than anyone else on earth."

Minette later married Otto Donner. Their well-known grandchild is author Jörn Donner.



Photo: finna.fi. Organization: The Finnish Heritage Agency. Collection: Historical Image Collection. Photographer: Unknown.

The Mythical Nineveh - Capital of Ancient Assyria

Ancient Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire and one of the largest cities of its time, but it was destroyed in 612 BC by the conquest of the Medes and Babylonians. In addition to the library built during the famous King Assurbanipal, several impressive palaces have been found in Nineveh, including beautifully decorated reliefs from wall panels in Sennacherib Palace. In addition to the palaces, tens of thousands of cuneiform tablets were found in Nineveh. Among these were both scientific texts and fiction. Today, the remains of Nineveh are located on the outskirts of the Iraqi city of Mosul, on the eastern banks of the Tigris River. Its location is still recognizable from two mounds produced by human activity: Tell Kuyunjik and Nebi Yunus. On these mounds stood the mighty palaces and temples of Nineveh.

Hilma Granqvist and Orientalism

The Middle East had long been studied from a European perspective, and Finnish research on the Middle East was also part of the scholarly endeavors of its time. This phenomenon is known as Orientalism. Palestinian-American scholar Edward Saïd addressed extensively with this topic in his critical work "Orientalism," which was published in 1978. In his work, he highlighted how Western-conducted research and representation presented the Middle East as a unified and passive region, opposite to the West. The perception of immutability often led to interpret the region's past through the study of its contemporary societies.

Anthropologist Hilma Granqvist, born in Sipoo in 1890, traveled to Palestine in the 1920s to study women's lives as depicted in the Bible. After spending some time with the local people, she realized that the present inhabitants of the region did not represent the biblical past, and she needed to study women's lives more broadly from their own perspectives. Despite facing criticism, Granqvist held onto her research approach and defended her doctoral thesis in 1932. Today, the method she developed to study a foreign culture by participating in its everyday life is known as participant observation, and it is one of the fundamental methods of modern anthropology.



Photo: finna.fi. Photographer: Atelier Nyblin. Organization: The Finnish Heritage Agency. Collection: Historical Image Collection.

Objects Tell Stories

The artifacts tell stories about the history of the ancient Middle East and the lives of people, but also about the history of Finnish researchers and explorers. The objects reflect how the Middle East has been seen in Europe and what topics have been of interest to researchers at different times. This section introduces a few items and uses them to highlight important cultural heritage themes. The objects belong to the Archaeology Collection of the Finnish Heritage Agency. The collections were once collected from the perspectives of Western research. These objects tell stories about the past and the region in which they have emerged from the history of both Finnish and European Middle Eastern research since the 19th century.

Clay tablets and cuneiform writing

These clay tablets contain texts written in cuneiform writing. The Sumerians developed the cuneiform writing system around 3500-2600 BCE. Cuneiform signs gradually spread and became the writing system for other languages spoken in the region, such as Akkadian. Cuneiform is the world's oldest known writing system, alongside ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, that can be deciphered.



Clay tablets. Photo: Finna.fi. The Finnish Heritage Agency: Archaeology collection.

The earliest clay tablets containing pictographic writing from Mesopotamia date back to the Late Uruk period, around 3300 BCE. However, early symbol systems are known from the Paleolithic or early Stone Age. Later, during the Neolithic or younger Stone Age, more complex systems emerged. As these languages are no longer known or readable, they are referred to as proto writing. They, along with writing systems of the Vinča-Turdaş culture in the Danube Valley and the Jiahu culture in China (around 6600 BCE), indicate that the invention of writing was not a singular revelation but the result of a long and intricate process.

Hundreds of thousands of cuneiform tablets have been preserved from the entire recorded history of Mesopotamia. Cuneiform texts have been found on wall reliefs and various objects, ranging from large steles to small clay tablets the size of a memo. The clay tablets are often smaller than imagined, with many fitting easily in the palm of one's hand. Words formed by cuneiform signs were impressed into moist clay using a sharp stylus, after which the clay was either fired or dried. The tablets contain various types of texts, including administrative documents, trade lists, receipts, literature, and personal correspondence. The world's oldest surviving literary work, the Epic of Gilgamesh, was also discovered inscribed on clay tablets. Gilgamesh, the king who ruled the city of Uruk, was a real historical figure. The stories associated with him circulated orally for a long time before being recorded centuries later.

Interest in the study of the ancient Near East spread when ancient writing systems, such as cuneiform and hieroglyphs, were deciphered in the mid-19th century. Museology and archaeology began to develop as sciences, although they operated from a Western perspective. European researchers conducted major archaeological excavations in Egypt and the ancient cities of Nineveh and Nimrud in what is now Iraq. For example, tens of thousands of tablets containing cuneiform writing have been found in Nineveh, preserving both scientific texts and literature, including parts of the Epic of Gilgamesh. Ancient Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire and one of the largest cities of its time. It was destroyed in 612 BCE during the conquests of the Medes and Babylonians. The city fascinated Western explorers as it is frequently mentioned in biblical narratives. In addition to the famous library assembled during the reign of King Ashurbanipal, several palaces have been discovered in Nineveh.

King Nebuchadnezzar II's clay cylinder and the provenance of artifacts

This clay cylinder dates back to the time of King Nebuchadnezzar II (605-562 BCE). The cuneiform script around the cylinder tells about the construction of a temple dedicated to the god Lugal-Marad in the city of Marad, located in Babylonia. The city was situated in Tell Wannat es-Sadum, present-day Iraq. Clay cylinders were ritual objects that were buried in the foundations of temples, palaces, or fortresses. They were intended to be read by future rulers and gods. The same text was often copied onto several cylinders. Clay cylinders from Nebuchadnezzar II are also found in collections around the world.

King Nabopolassar and Crown Prince Nebuchadnezzar II conquered the western parts of the Assyrian Empire and brought them under Babylonian rule. The name Nebuchadnezzar is derived from the Old Testament, and in Akkadian, the name is Nabu-kudurri-ušur. Nebuchadnezzar restored and rebuilt several temples in the city of Babylon, which was already over a thousand years old at that time. These building projects and agricultural reforms led to the flourishing of the region.



Photo: Nebuchadnezzar II's clay cylinder. The Finnish Heritage Agency: Archaeology collection.

The origin of the clay cylinder, which is now part of the archaeological collections of the Finnish Heritage Agency, is unknown. It was purchased in Paris in 1913 by Harri Holma and his friend, anthropologist Kai Donner, from the well-known Iraqi antiquities dealer Ibrahim Elias Gėjoult.

Many of the items sold by G ejoult can be found in various museums, including the British Museum. Harri Holma, born in 1886 in H ameenlinna, Finland, studied oriental languages and Assyriology in Helsinki, Leipzig, Berlin, and London. After Finland gained independence, he served as an ambassador in countries such as Germany, France, and Italy. Most of the clay tablets containing cuneiform script displayed in the "Exploring the Ancient Near East" exhibition were likely acquired from the same seller in Paris.

Provenance refers to precise information about the origin and ownership chain of a museum object. This information is important for verifying the authenticity of the object. Knowledge of the place of discovery aids in the study of the object and increases its scientific value. Especially when an object is from the era of Western colonialism, it is crucial to ensure that it was ethically obtained from a legal owner. Unfortunately, the high demand for ancient artifacts, such as clay tablets with cuneiform script, coins, and sculptures, in the antiquities market has led to looting of archaeological finds in the Near East.

[Egyptian burial coffin and the fragile legacy of the Ancient Near East](#)

This Egyptian coffin ended up in Finland through the efforts of the explorer Georg August Wallin. Wallin acquired this wooden coffin in Cairo in 1848. The coffin belonged to Ankhefenamun, a civil servant of the Karnak Temple. During its long journey, Ankhefenamun's mummy disappeared, and the empty coffin did not arrive in the collections of the Imperial Alexander University of Helsinki until 1860. These collections were later merged with the National Museum's collections. Wallin also sent a number of other items to Finland during his travels in the Middle East. With Napoleon's conquests, interest in Egypt arose in 18th-century Europe. Huge quantities of Egyptian antiquities were brought to Europe from conquests and expeditions. In Finland, too, the Finnish Heritage Agency's collections and museums contain hundreds of items originating from Egypt. The fascination with Egypt was so wide that it is referred to as Egyptomania. Learn more about Wallin and Egyptomania in the Researchers section.



Photo: Wooden coffin. The Finnish Heritage Agency: Archaeology collection.

UNESCO – International cooperation for the protection of cultural heritage

Western interest in the ancient Middle East has had a significant impact on its cultural heritage: artifacts from the region are preserved in museums around the world and local archaeological sites are protected through international treaties and legislation. The transportation of archaeological objects from one country to another is usually subject to a permit and is strictly regulated. In Egypt, the trade and export of antiquities began to be regulated by law as early as the 19th century, when exporting artefacts to the West became more common. In 1983, Egypt banned the export of archaeological artifacts altogether. The Second World War also caused enormous damage to material cultural heritage, such as buildings and objects. After the war, there was a strong international will to build peace through international cooperation in science, education and culture. UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, was founded in 1945 to carry out this work.

One of the milestones in UNESCO's heritage work is the international project to save objects and other material culture of the Nubian culture from the basin of Aswan. The Nubia region, between present-day Egypt and Sudan, once flourished as a vast empire. Finland participated in the international rescue project in 1961 to 1964 together with other Nordic countries. Nearly 500 sites, 4 200 burials and about 2 600 petroglyphs were recorded and studied in the project. The findings of the archaeological excavations were divided between Sudan and the Nordic

countries. A selection of these unique but rarely presented objects are still included in the archaeological collections of the Finnish Heritage Agency.

At international level, the 1970 UNESCO Convention is a significant step in the protection of archaeological sites and objects. The agreement aims to prevent illegal trade in material cultural heritage and has already been approved by 141 countries. Finland acknowledged this agreement in its legislation in 1999. A key value considered in laws and agreements is the ability of local communities to manage their own cultural heritage. The community can voluntarily use its cultural heritage as it wishes. For example, in the 1970s the Iraqi state strengthened its ties with other countries by donating ancient artifacts. Finland's president at the time, Urho Kekkonen, also received donations from Iraq.

The cultural heritage of the Middle East is still endangered. As in the rest of the world, construction and land use have a major impact on the preservation of cultural heritage sites. Wars and conflicts destroy heritage sites and museum collections around the world. In addition, archaeological finds are sought in the antique market. Through online marketplaces, illegal antique trading has become faster and easier. Interest in archaeological artifacts increases looting and illegal export. In addition to the UNESCO Conventions on Cultural Heritage, European Union legislation, local legislation and international cooperation to prevent illegal activities against cultural heritage are key elements in the protection of cultural heritage.

Current research and studying

[Centre of Excellence in Ancient Near Eastern Empires and studying in the University of Helsinki](#)

Ancient Near Eastern research and education have a long-standing tradition in Finland. The region has captivated Finnish scholars and explorers from the 19th century to the present day.

In recent years, research on the Ancient Near East has been carried out in several different research projects. Finnish research on the Ancient Near East is internationally recognized and

has gained scholarly appreciation in the fields of Assyriology, archaeology, papyrology, and biblical studies. In addition to universities, research work is conducted at the Finnish Institute in the Middle East (FIME).

Led by Professor Saana Svärd, the Centre of excellence in Ancient Near Eastern Empires investigates the people, history, and languages of the region from various perspectives, such as linguistics, digital methods, network analysis, and archaeological fieldwork.

You can study Ancient Near Eastern research at the University of Helsinki in the Bachelor's and Master's programs offered by the Faculty of Humanities. The University of Helsinki is the only place in Finland where you can study ancient Near Eastern languages and cultures either as a major or as elective courses. You can study languages such as Akkadian and Sumerian, as well as courses on culture, history, and methodology.

[Examples of other research projects](#)

Digitization of Cuneiform Tablets

The digitization project initiated by Professor Simo Parpola in the 1960s, involving cuneiform tablets, led to the Assyrian State Archives Excellence Unit's project, which publishes cuneiform tablets found in the ancient palace of Nineveh. Thanks to this project, Finland has become an international center for research on the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

Archaeological Excavations on Mount Aaron in Jordan

Led by Professor Jaakko Frösen, the Finnish Excavations on Mount Aaron project investigated the ruins of the Holy Monastery of Aaron and inventoried the surrounding area in Petra, Jordan. The project was based on Frösen's extensive work in conserving and documenting charred papyrus scrolls discovered in the ancient city of Petra. The preservation of the papyrus scrolls opened the doors to a multidisciplinary project and archaeological excavations of the monastery ruins.

Sacred Texts in the Ancient Near Eastern Cultural Sphere

Under the leadership of Professor Martti Nissinen, the Sacred Texts and Traditions in Transition Excellence Unit brought together researchers in Old Testament exegesis, archaeology, Assyriology, Qumran studies, and New Testament exegesis to investigate how major cultural changes in the ancient Near East influenced the origins and changes of sacred texts and how these texts, in turn, shaped ancient cultures.

The University of Helsinki has served as the home for all the above-mentioned projects, with the main funding provided by the university itself and the Academy of Finland.

Helpful links

[Tutkimusmatkoja muinaiseen Lähi-itään](#) - animated video of the history of Mesopotamia

[Ancient Near Eastern Empires – Centre of Excellence 2018–2025](#) - video presentation in English showcasing the research work of the Centre of excellence in Ancient Near Eastern Empires

[10 FACTS ABOUT THE OLDEST EMPIRES IN THE WORLD - YouTube](#)

[Kieliteknologia/Computational linguistics - YouTube](#)

[Savitiilet rakennusmateriaaleina/Mudbricks - YouTube](#)

[Naiset muinaisessa Lähi-idässä/Women in ancient Near East - YouTube](#)

[Provenance/Proveniensi - YouTube](#)

[3D models by Museovirasto Museiverket Finnish Heritage Agency \(@Museovirasto\) - Sketchfab](#)