Hittite Cuneiform—Language and the Written Form

by Charles W. Oughton (Classical Historiography and Biography)

As humanists we know that language is a powerful tool for connecting with other people. Our ability to understand languages from the distant past, however, is often limited by our ability to decipher the writing system that records them. At times, the development of the technology for writing has its own complicated and intriguing history.

The tablet pictured here contains Hittite, an Indo-European language from Bronze-Age Anatolia, as recorded in cuneiform, the writing system developed for Sumerian and later adapted to Akkadian, a Semitic language. Cuneiform is a writing system that uses a mixture of syllabic signs (each symbol represents a syllable) and logograms (a symbol represents an entire word). The quantity of signs that are in common use thereby makes writing a specialized skill, practiced only by trained scribes.

When the Hittites conquered part of Syria, their king ordered a group of Babylonian scribes captured there to be taken back to his kingdom, where they were forced to record official documents of the Hittite court. As these scribes adapted cuneiform to the Hittite language, they used a mixture of syllabic signs to record the sounds of Hittite words and the logograms of the original Sumerian or Akkadian words to represent common concepts. Often, these logograms could be written more quickly than spelling out the Hittite word phonetically. For instance, the Sumerogram for “god,” DINGIR (𒀭), consisted of a single sign, but to spell that out in Hittite phonetically would require four signs: si-uni-isi. As a result, there are common words that the scribes only wrote using the logograms, leaving us no idea what actual Hittite words the signs describe (for example, DUMU “son” 𒌉 or MUNU “woman” 𒊩).

Several generations later, the scribes were native Hittite speakers who had no working knowledge of Sumerian or Akkadian. However, they continued to use the ideographic signs from these languages that were hardwired into the writing system. The scribes started to append Hittite word endings onto the Sumerograms (e.g., DUMU-an, “of the sons”), suggesting that they likely sounded out the underlying Hittite word, despite the writing system still displaying the sign for a language that was, by then, obsolete for hundreds of years.

The technology used to record ancient Hittite helps us understand not just the language of that people but also the layers of history and cultural exchanges and influences evident in the development of that writing system. As we unravel the historical context of ancient writings, we appreciate more fully the power that language systems have to represent culture, identity, and history.