

# Rediscovering the Past | The birth of archaeology | Ancient voices

Discovery and decipherment of inscriptions allowed the ancient cultures to speak to us directly.

Before the 19th century what was known about the great civilisations of Babylon, Assyria and Egypt came from classical and biblical sources. Now the discovery of texts written by those cultures themselves became known in large numbers. In 1822, French scholar Jean-François Champollion cracked the Egyptian hieroglyphic code thanks to the Rosetta Stone. While in 1857, the official decipherment of Assyrian was recognised. The ancient world was no less cosmopolitan than today's. The sound of many languages filled the streets of big cities. Some are related to languages still spoken today: Akkadian and Aramaic are sister languages to Arabic, for example. This closeness helped scholars to decipher and read the ancient texts. Great efforts were made to correlate the newly discovered monuments and texts with classical and biblical sources. Would they confirm or refute their testimony?



**Working Number:** UK 107

**Name:** The Rosetta Stone

**Holding Museum:** The British Museum

**Date:** 196 BC; acquisition date: 1801

**Materials:** -

**Curator Justification:** The Rosetta Stone is famous for providing the key to the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs. The inscription is a priestly decree affirming the cult of young King Ptolemy V. The text, written in hieroglyphs, Demotic and Greek, played the key role in the decipherment of hieroglyphs.



**Working Number:** UK 106

**Name:** The Rosetta Stone

**Holding Museum:** The British Museum

**Date:** 1801

**Materials:** -

**Curator Justification:** The French gave Britain the Rosetta Stone under the terms of the Capitulation of Alexandria. Here, British General Hutchinson tasks the traveller and scientist, Edward Daniel Clarke, to ensure the security of the Stone, and to copy its inscription. A copy was given to the French scholar, Champollion, who succeeded in deciphering the text.



**Working Number:** UK 072

**Name:** The Flood Tablet

**Holding Museum:** The British Museum

**Date:** 7th century BC

**Materials:** -

**Curator Justification:** The Flood Tablet, actually the 11th tablet of the Gilgamesh Epic, made international news in 1872. George Smith, cuneiform scholar at the British Museum, translated this story of a Flood that bears a

very close resemblance to the biblical account. How could a story thought to have been revealed by God to his chosen people be found elsewhere, and in a text older than the Bible?



**Working Number:** RO 029

**Name:** A Khorsabad barrel

**Holding Museum:** National Museum of Romanian History

**Date:** 721–705 BC (reign of Sargon II); discovered in 1851–1854

**Materials:** -

**Curator Justification:** Mesopotamian rulers buried time capsules in their major buildings. This barrel cylinder was made to record the deeds of King Sargon II of Assyria. He describes how he constructed a new capital city, which he named after himself. It also records that he defeated King Midas, famous today for his fabled power to turn anything he touched into gold. Royal inscriptions like this were vital in reconstructing ancient history.



**Working Number:** AT 022

**Name:** Tomb relief from Palmyra

**Holding Museum:** Kunsthistorisches Museum, Collection of Greek and Roman Antiquities

**Date:** AD 3rd century

**Materials:** Stone

**Curator Justification:** The ancient world was a cosmopolitan place. In big cities, people from across the known world lived side by side. The different cultures borrowed from each other freely. Here at Palmyra (Syria) was a blend of Roman and Aramaic cultures. Aramaic is still spoken in some villages in southern Syria, as well as by modern Assyrian communities.