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Babylonian, dead for millennia, now online

By RAPHAEL G. SATTER – 4 days ago

LONDON — The language of the Epic of Gilgamesh and King Hammurabi has found a new life online after being dead for some 2,000 years.

Academics from across the world have recorded audio of Babylonian epics, poems, and even a magic spell to the Internet in an effort to help scholars and laymen understand what the language of the ancient Near East sounded like.

The answer? Cambridge University's Martin Worthington told The Associated Press that it's "a bit like a mixture of Arabic and Italian."

Babylonia was among the world's first civilizations and produced some of its earliest pieces of literature. Its people also play a central role in the Bible. Babylon's soaring, pyramid-shaped Temple of Marduk is thought to have inspired the tale of the Tower of Babel, while their conquest of the Kingdom of Judah in the early sixth century B.C. led to the deportation and exile of the nation's Jewish population.

The Babylonian language, written on clay tablets in cuneiform script, dominated the Near East for centuries before it was gradually displaced by Aramaic. After a long decline, it disappeared from use altogether sometime in the first century A.D. — and was only deciphered nearly two millennia later by 19th-century European academics.

Worthington, who specializes in the study of Babylonian language and literature, said he got the idea of posting audio recordings of the ancient tongue to the Web because "the questions which students of ancient languages most frequently hear from laymen are: 'How did they sound? And how do you know?'"

He said scholars have a pretty good idea of what Babylonian sounded like by comparing the language to its Semitic cousins — Hebrew and Arabic — and by picking out Babylonian words written in Greek or Aramaic. The vowel patterns within Babylonian itself also provide clues as to how some words are supposed to sound, he said.

The website hosts some 30 audio files, generally a few minutes long. Among them are extracts from "The Epic of Gilgamesh," and the "Codex Hammurabi," one of the world's oldest set of laws.

There are also several versions of the "Poem of the Righteous Sufferer," a Babylonian tale that closely parallels the Biblical story of Job, and other texts, including an erotic hymn to the goddess Ishtar and an incantation to prevent dog bites.

The initiative draws enthusiastic support from Roger Woodard, a classics professor at the University of Buffalo in New York state who is not involved with the project.

"I think it's a wonderful idea," said Woodard, who counts Babylonian among his languages. "There are just a few people in every generation who are the keepers of this knowledge, and by putting it on the Internet it's possible for a great many more people to be exposed to it, which in the end would help with the preservation of this knowledge."

He said audio files will be helpful because most students who study ancient languages are only exposed to texts and do not get a chance to hear how the language actually sounds.

Worthington said recordings were made by about a dozen specialists from several different countries, adding that his favorite part of the project was listening to how Babylonian varied depending on each accent.

So do they all pronounce Babylonian in the same way? And what does the language really sound like?

"Listen to the recordings and judge for yourself," he said.

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Associated Press Writer Gregory Katz contributed to this report.

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