

**BELOW** This traditional image of Noah's Ark has been usurped by the ancient cuneiform text (**INSET**) which describes how to build a coracle-shaped vessel instead.

# The Ark Before Noah

## How to build your ark

The discovery of Babylonian cuneiform instructions for building a boat to survive catastrophic floodwaters written more than 1,000 years before the Hebrew version of Noah and the Flood sparked a detective story that has **Andrew Robinson** hooked.

**T**he author of *The Ark Before Noah*, Irving Finkel, has been a curator at the British Museum since 1979, where he is currently in charge of the world's largest collection of cuneiform clay tablets. To work at the Museum was his ambition ever since the age of nine, he confesses. The arcane art of deciphering badly damaged examples of the world's oldest writing system clearly remains his life's passion. But Finkel is one of those relatively uncommon academic researchers who can communicate their erudition and passion to non-academics. Through a combination of rigorous scholarship, skilful dramatisation, personal reminiscence, and ironic humour – no doubt honed by decades of giving gallery talks to museum visitors – Finkel manages to draw in readers who know almost nothing about his chosen subject beyond the broad outline of the biblical story of the Flood, the morally righteous Noah, his building of a floating ark, and its populating by pairs of male and female animals. The result is a complex and intellectually demanding, but rewarding and frequently entertaining, detective story – the solution to which is changing accepted views of the ark and how the Old Testament came to be written.

The hitherto-undeciphered, partially damaged, 60-line, Babylonian tablet – now named the Ark Tablet – that drives the story is the oldest of the nine known

cuneiform tablets that contribute to our understanding of the Mesopotamian story of the Flood, which forms part of the celebrated epic of Gilgamesh. The Ark Tablet dates from the Old Babylonian period – that is, about 1750 BC (more than a thousand years older than the composition of the Hebrew Bible).

The tablet first came into Finkel's hands in 1985. It had been brought to the museum by a member of the public, the late Douglas Simmonds, whose father, an amateur collector of antiquities, acquired the tablet while stationed in the Near East with the RAF near the end of the Second World War. He had given it to his son in 1974. 'I explained that it would take many hours to wrestle meaning from the broken signs, but Douglas would not by any means leave his tablet

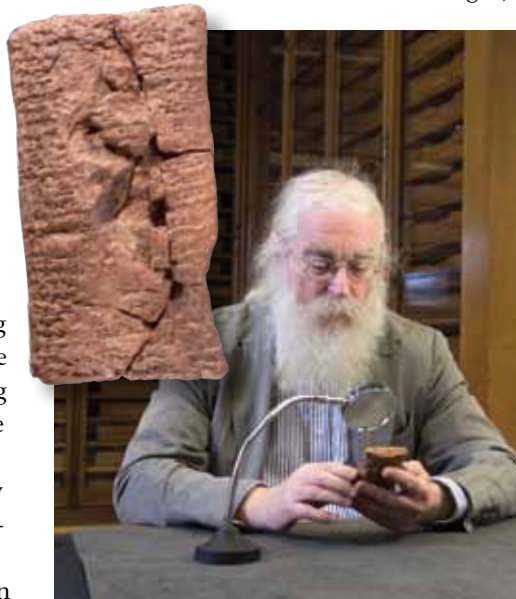
with me', recalls an initially frustrated Finkel. 'As a matter of fact, he did not even seem to be especially excited at the announcement that his tablet was a Highly Important Document of the Highest Possible Interest, and he quite failed to observe that I was wobbly with desire to get on with deciphering it.'

Well over a decade would pass until, in 2009, as a consequence of a cajoling chat with Simmonds at a British Museum exhibition on *Babylon: myth and reality* curated by Finkel, he was allowed to borrow the tantalising tablet and get to grips with trying to read it.

There are several high points in the story. This is one of the most striking: '[my] biggest shock

**LEFT** Dr Finkel examines the small Babylonian tablet that is changing our view of ark design.

**INSET** The reverse side of the tablet.



in 44 years of grappling with difficult lines in cuneiform tablets,' Finkel observes. 'My best shot at the first two signs beginning line 52 came up with *ša* and *na*, both incompletely preserved. On looking unhelpfully for words beginning *šana*- ... in the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* Š PART 1 ŠA-ŠAP, I found the following entry and nearly fell off my chair as a result of the words: "*šana* (or *šanā*) adv. Two each, two by two; OA [Old Assyrian]\*; cf. *šina*".'

Finkel comments: 'In plain English, there is an Akkadian word *šana*, or possibly *šanā*, an adverb derived from the numeral two, *šina*, which has the specific meaning "two each, two by two"... For the first time we learn that the Babylonian animals, like those of Noah, *went in two by two*, a completely unsuspected Babylonian tradition that draws us ever closer to the familiar narrative of the Bible. So, we can read in the Ark Tablet:

But the wild animals (*namaštu*) from the steppe (*šēru*) [...] Two by two ... did [they enter the ark.]



**ABOVE** Iraqi Marsh Arabs build a reed coracle. **INSET** Its design allows a coracle to be packed with cargo without compromising stability.

However, the most extraordinary – indeed television-newsworthy – information to emerge from the Ark Tablet concerns the shape of the ark and its method of construction. The opening lines on the relatively undamaged front of the tablet consist of the following words, apparently spoken by the Babylonian god Ea (Sumerian Enki) to 'Captain' Atra-hasīs, the Babylonian equivalent of the biblical Noah:

Wall, wall! Reed wall, reed wall!  
Atra-hasīs, pay heed to my advice,  
That you may live for ever!  
Destroy your house, build a boat;  
Spurn property and save life!  
Draw out the boat that you will make  
On a circular plan;

Detailed building instructions follow, for example:

Let her floor area be one field, let her sides be one *nindan* high.  
You [have seen] *kammu* ropes and *ašlu* ropes/rushes [before].

Let someone (else) twist the fronds and palm-fibre for you!  
It will surely consume 14,430 (*sūtu*)!  
To which Atra-hasīs responds:

I set in place thirty ribs  
Which were one *parsiktu*-vessel thick, ten *nindan* long;  
I set up 3,600 stanchions within her  
Which were half (a *parsiktu*-vessel) thick, half a *nindan* high;  
I constructed her cabins above and below.

Next, he describes exactly how much bitumen he used to seal the outside and inside of the reed vessel.

## Round design

After much deliberation, and with the invaluable assistance of a mathematician (Mark Wilson), Finkel concludes that the Old Babylonian ark was not at all the oblong boat described in the Bible (300 cubits long by 50 wide) and portrayed by artists over the centuries. It was, in truth, circular: 'a truly giant coracle'. Such coracles have been used for transport on the great rivers of Mesopotamia since Antiquity, as described

by Herodotus; their construction was detailed in the 1930s by the boat historian James Hornell, whose technical account was indispensable to Finkel. Since a Babylonian 'field' is equivalent to a modern acre, the floor area of Atra-hasīs's coracle works out at around 3,600m<sup>2</sup>, about the half the size of a soccer pitch. Its reed walls, at about 6m in height, 'would effectively inhibit an upright male giraffe from looking over at us', notes Finkel. Its chief purpose was to be a stable floating refuge for human and animal life from the rising floodwaters, not to sail in any particular direction like a conventional boat. 'The vast coracle would be "launched" of its own accord, as the waters arrived, like an abandoned lilo on the beach gradually taken up by an incoming tide.'

There are difficulties in explaining how a circular Old Babylonian ark was transmuted into a square ark (as described in the later Gilgamesh epic, recorded in Assyrian in the 1st millennium BC), and eventually into the oblong ark of Noah recorded in the Hebrew Bible. Finkel tackles this problem head-on, but he admits that the limited evidence is open to other interpretations. For him, the transmutation in shape 'reinforces the linear descent from cuneiform into Hebrew', which underlies his entire book. In essence, Finkel makes the novel proposal that some of the Jews became directly familiar with the cuneiform tradition by learning how to read cuneiform during the period of Judaeen exile from Israel in Babylon, traditionally dated 597-539 BC. Having read the Babylonian story of the Flood for themselves, the Jews then recycled it 'for their own purposes with new messages'. In the process, they injected a moral element: the destruction of the world, for which no reason is given in cuneiform, became, in Hebrew, God's punishment for the wickedness of man. ▣

Andrew Robinson is the author of *The Story of Writing: alphabets, hieroglyphs and pictograms*.

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