

the swamps and marshes of Mesopotamia, which had been formed by slow reclamation from the sea by the deposits brought down by the Euphrates and Tigris. Here the Sumerians settled down and commenced a life of laborious toil. They dug canals, they dried the swamps, they regulated the rivers, they cultivated the soil; their tents were followed by mudhouses, and to these succeeded sun-dried, and fire-burned bricks, cemented together in solid walls by molten bitumen. Under the blight of the Turk and his strange and backward religion, Mesopotamia is now a land of arid sand and pestiferous swamps. Under the hands of the Sumerians Mesopotamia was, seven or eight thousand years ago, the most fruitful place on the earth.

Now I must tell you how we come to know anything about these Sumerians. Our knowledge comes now at first, and from translating a certain part of the library of Sardanapalus, (608-626 B.C.), erroneously spoken of as the last King of Assyria, who you may remember was formerly said in our histories, on the authority of Ctesias, to have buried himself with his wives and treasures when the Medes and Persians took Nineveh. But all that account of him was incorrect. He died as he lived—a great King—in 625 or 626 B.C. at Nineveh, which Sardanapalus had made the capital of Assyria in 606 B.C., fell in 608, taken by the Medes, under King Cyaxares, assisted by the King of Babylon, probably the father of Nebuchadnezzar. The records of Sardanapalus are written on clay tiles. They contain an account of the Sumerians, composed by the Chaldean priests, line by line in the Sumerian and Semitic languages, in the cuneiform character, written about 2000 B.C., about the time of Abraham. The Sumerian tongue had already nearly died out, and hence the priests had to translate it into the Semitic language to preserve it on record. The Sumerians, like the Mexicans on the arrival of Cortes, wrote at first by sketches or pictures, apparently on some vegetable substance. With this picture-writing you are familiar in the hieroglyphics of the Egyptians, who used this form of writing at a much later date. The example of pictures instead of what we call writing—which etymologically means scratching—is best known to you in the picture-bibles used in Europe for people that could not read. The Sumerians next used clay tiles, instead of paper, parchment, or any other substitute, probably in order to obtain permanent records. Writing on stone, which was certainly carried to great perfection under Hammurabi, and which we still practice, would have been difficult in South Mesopotamia owing to the absence of stone. It soon became convenient in practice to convert the outline of pictures into straight lines in different combinations, which may have been stamped, and not scratched, into the soft clay, so that the original picture