

Pythagorean triangles were a common subject for school mathematics problems in ancient Mesopotamia. This point has been made before (e.g., by Friberg [9]) but hasn't yet proved particularly helpful in deciding between the three interpretations of Plimpton 322. What we shall do instead is to make some *new* comparisons. None of the comparative material itself is new though: all but one of the documents I have chosen were published at the same time as Plimpton 322 or decades earlier.

First, Plimpton 322 is a table. Hundreds of other tables, both mathematical and nonmathematical, have been excavated from Mesopotamian archaeological sites. What can we learn from them?

Second, if Plimpton 322 is a *trigonometry* table, then there should be other evidence of measured angle from Mesopotamia. We shall go in search of this.

Third, Plimpton 322 contains words as well as numbers: the headings at the top of each column should tell us what the tablet is about. Some of the more difficult words also appear on other mathematical documents from Mesopotamia. Can they help us to understand their function on Plimpton 322?

Finally, Plimpton 322 was written by an *individual*. What, if anything, can we say about him or her, and why the tablet was made?

2. TURNING THE TABLES ON GENERATING FUNCTIONS. Let's start with some very general contextualisation. We can learn a lot about any tablet simply from its size, shape, and handwriting.

Plimpton 322 is named after its first Western owner, the New York publisher George A. Plimpton (see Donoghue [8]). He bequeathed his whole collection of historical mathematical books and artefacts to Columbia University in the mid-1930s along with a large number of personal effects. Surviving correspondence shows that he bought the tablet for \$10 from a well-known dealer called Edgar J. Banks in about 1922 [2]. Banks told him it came from an archaeological site called Senkereh in southern Iraq, whose ancient name was Larsa [Figure 5].

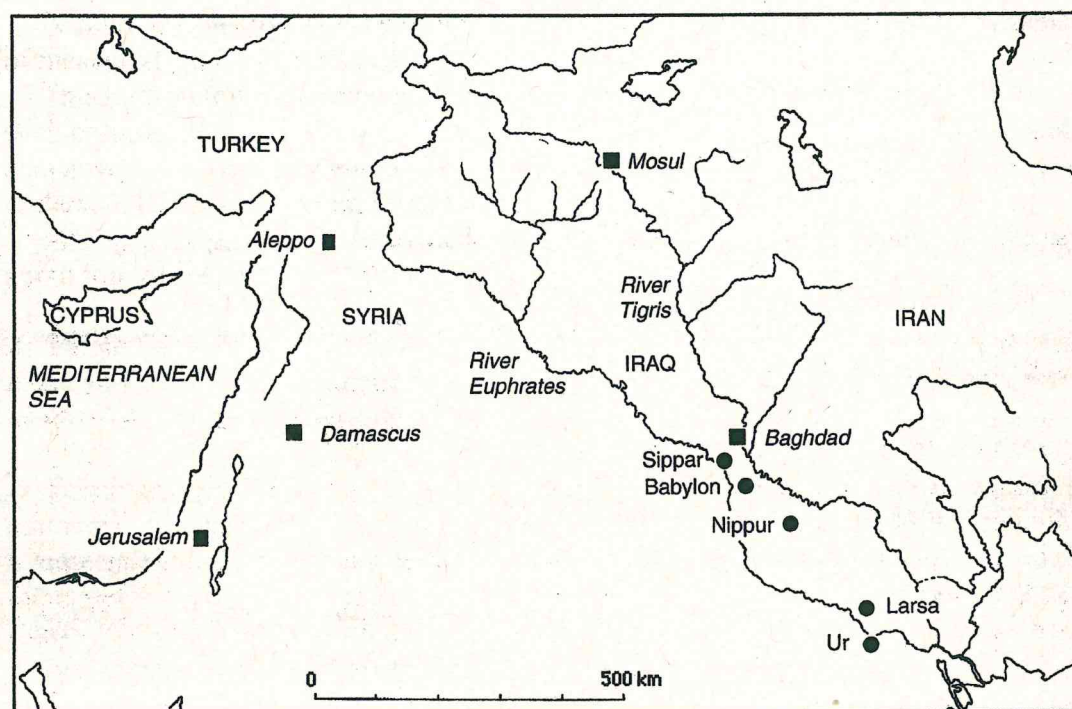


Figure 5. Map of the archaeological sites mentioned in the text. Drawing by the author.