

## THE INVENTION OF WRITING

The purpose of any writing is to preserve what is most important to a people. The first attempts at written communication were probably aesthetic: paintings drawn on the walls of caves or petroglyphs incised into rock. These may have had magical, religious or social significance in addition to their artistic expression, but we can never fully recover the meaning these pictures may have had within their own cultures. True forerunners of writing were devices to help people remember what was important to them: notched sticks or knotted strings were mnemonic devices for keeping track of calendar dates or genealogical information; tattoos or brands marked membership or ownership.<sup>1</sup>

Writing evolved from the need to keep records. The earliest preserved records we have are from about 3100 before the common era (b.c.e.)<sup>2</sup> in Mesopotamia. These Sumerian temple transactions are recorded simply as marks on clay tokens to note the number of items transferred to or from temple stores. Eventually, these number marks were accompanied by crude symbols, like the head of an ox, showing exactly what was transferred in addition to how many. These static impressions are the most primitive stage of representing thought. Expressions of essential detail are missing, making the message ambiguous. Does the mark for 20 together with the mark for ox mean 20 head of oxen were delivered TO the temple, moved FROM the temple, or were housed IN the temple grounds? Temple officials probably knew the direction of such transactions, though we cannot reconstruct them today from the written records. Also, although these symbols may have been useful for keeping track of concrete transactions, they could not express more abstract ideas. The need to express ideas following or relating one to another pushed written expression beyond a static impression reflecting a real object.<sup>3</sup>

The problem: physical objects can be drawn, but ideas cannot. The solution: let the physical object stand for an idea. For example, at the simpler "pictograph" stage of writing, a circle may stand for the concrete object of the sun. But, with very little extension, such a circle can also convey the abstract ideas of "heat," "light," "day," or ideas about time such as "when" or "on the day that."<sup>4</sup> When the system is this highly developed, we call it "ideographic." Although this solution does not eliminate ambiguity, the context of the writing usually can indicate which of these many ideas was meant by the writer. We still use ideograms today. Any Western reader knows the meaning of \$, =, %, or 5, even though he or she might use different words to name these symbols depending on the reader's native language. Company logos, coats of arms, images on

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1. Gelb, 100; Diringer.

2. note to editor: scholars use the non-sectarian designations b.c.e. and c.e. rather than b.c. or a.d. See any issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*, for example, for explanation and use of these terms in a publication bridging the scholarly and the popular.

3. Kramer, *Time/Life*.

4. Note, this is the case in the Sumerian logogram "Ud" or "U4" which represents these different meanings and began as a pictogram of a circle representing the sun [see R. Labat's syllabary, *Manuel d'epigraphie akkadienne*, (Paris, 1976), loc. cit.]

coins and stamps, even the marks on playing cards, dice or dominos are modern examples of ideograms at work.<sup>5</sup>

Cuneiform is the most ancient system of writing, developed by the Sumerians who lived at the mouth of the Persian Gulf in what is present-day Iraq in about 3500 b.c.e. (the ancient Chinese system of writing, in comparison, originated in about 1500 b.c.e.) Its name comes from the Latin cuneus = wedge + forma = shape, describing the contour of the marks making up the writing system. In the cuneiform system, the pictures of the most primitive pictographs are simplified and abstracted--due, in part, to the materials and implements used for writing. In order to avoid smudging by a right-handed scribe, wet clay required turning the letters 90 degrees and writing in one direction only, from left to right. Cursive shapes were squared off due to the wedge shapes made by the styluses made of reed or wood. [Much later, development of writing using different materials resulted in differences in letter shape and writing direction. For example, writing on parchment or pieces of dry pottery (ostrakon), as was the case in ancient Israel,<sup>6</sup> meant scribes could keep writing from right to left, using pen and ink instead of a wedge-shaped reed. These materials encouraged cursive writing.<sup>7</sup>]

Eventually, the sound for the concrete object represented by pictures began to have a life of its own, where, as in an English rebus, a picture of a bee plus a picture of a leaf could convey the unrelated and completely abstract concept of "belief." The Egyptians, Sumerians and their successors expressed their abstract ideas with this kind of "rebus writing" using words for concrete things that sounded in combination like other words for more abstract ideas. Later, only the sounds were retained, and the original meaning of the object they represent was completely forgotten or ignored. This is the first stage of phonetic writing, where symbols stand for specific sounds. There are two stages in this process. The first, called syllabic, is based on linking the sounds of syllables into words. The smallest unit is a vowel + consonant (AB) or consonant + vowel (BA). These transitional writing systems stand between the ideographic and the second stage of phonetic writing, the alphabetic approach. A modern example of stage one is the Chinese writing system. An ancient example is the cuneiform writing system used for the Semitic language now called Akkadian, originating in Assyria and Babylonia. Akkadian was based on and influenced by the original Sumerian system, and still contained some ideograms, but for the most part greatly abstracted from the original concrete pictographs.<sup>8</sup>

Cumbersome as the cuneiform system of writing is, it was used and adapted by many cultures over three thousand years, including Sumerian, Akkadian (the collective term for the closely-related Babylonian and Assyrian dialects), Eblaite, Hittite, Elamite, Hurrian, Ugaritic, Urartian, Aramaic and Persian, although the specific system of syllabic and phonetic writing differed from region to region (much as French and English today use pretty much the same letters adapted to the phonetic needs of two different

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5. Mostly Diringer. Some examples are oral communication from David Marcus.

6. Do you want reference to biblical examples, as in Jeremiah's secretary Baruch preparing parchment for the prophet's message to the king, or the Lachish ostraka describing the situation during the last days of the Judean empire?

7. Kramer, *Time/ Life*

8. Diringer



languages). Several bodies of great literature were written down in cuneiform script.<sup>9</sup> The earliest, Sumerian, produced a vast and highly developed literature consisting of hymns, myths, epics, omens, incantations, administrative texts and legal texts left to us on tens of thousands of cuneiform-inscribed clay tablets, most from about 2000 b.c.e.<sup>10</sup> The forms and ideas contained in these texts spread all over western Asia through conquest and trade by the Sumerian kings and by their semitic successors, Assyria and Babylonia. Due to the tremendous impact of the cultures of the Mesopotamian region on all of west Asia, cuneiform script continued in some use up to the first century c.e.,<sup>11</sup> although from about 800 b.c.e. cuneiform Akkadian was gradually replaced by alphabetic Aramaic as the language of the people, and, eventually, as the diplomatic language. Since Aramaic was written on perishable parchment and papyrus, our heritage of Aramaic documents from earliest times is much poorer than is our store of Akkadian.<sup>12</sup>

The problem with syllabic writing is that it requires more symbols than does alphabetic writing to account for all the different possible sounds. Assyrian syllabic writing had about 600 signs, some with more than one sound. Modern Chinese and Japanese syllabic writing has about 80,000 signs, of which about 9,000 are used regularly. The result of this complexity is that writing was a skill reserved for an elite group trained from their youth, giving rise to a class of SCRIBES.<sup>13</sup>

Scribes were taught in formal schools often associated with the temple, some of which have been unearthed by archaeologists sifting through the past.<sup>14</sup> Young scribes proceeded through a rigorous curriculum including several languages, mathematics, music, commerce, diplomacy, law, temple and court administration, and literature. They learned by rote, taking dictation and copying from master copies of classic texts. Many of the clay tablets we have today are school copies (replete with student errors!). Although Sumerian ceased to be a living language by about 1800 b.c.e., Sumerian was the learned language mastered by scribes in a variety of cultures for many hundred of years after it was no longer spoken, much as were Greek and Latin during the European Middle Ages. Sumerian was used by the scholarly, priestly, and scribal classes until the end of the first century c.e.<sup>15</sup> This widespread use of Sumerian as the scholarly language, and of Semitic Akkadian, deeply influenced by Sumerian culture, as the language of diplomacy, resulted in the indirect impact of Sumerian themes, motifs, and ideas upon all later literatures.

### The Development of the Alphabet

Alphabetic writing requires between 22 and 30 symbols, and can be adapted from one language to another. For example, English, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, Polish, Dutch, Czech, Croatian, Welsh, Finnish and Hungarian are all written in alphabets developed through the Phoenician, Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek,

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9. de Moor.

10. Kramer, History Begins at Sumer, and idem. The Sumerians.

11. de Moor

12. ABD, Mesopotamia, history of (Assyria) p.734 col. b.

13. Diringier

14. De Moor, p.79 col.b, refers to a photo of excavated school, ill.10.

15. All material on Sumerian culture can be found in either of the two Kramer books cited above.

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Etruscan, and Roman tongues. All modern Western alphabets come from the Semitic alphabet. Alphabetic writing was in use in Palestine as early as 1600 b.c.e. The Phoenicians, based on the Mediterranean coast, carried on active trade with Egypt and the areas that later became Greece and Rome. The Greeks borrowed this alphabet from the Phoenicians about 1000 b.c.e., which explains why the order of letters in Hebrew, Greek and English is so similar. Differences are due to the fact that each of the languages had sounds that did not occur in the others, and so letters were adapted to fit the sounds of the language using that alphabet.<sup>16</sup>

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16. Joseph Naveh, Early History of the Alphabet, (Leiden, 1982).