

Mesopotamia: The origins of writing

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- Jemdet Nasr (3100 - 2900 BC; 200 years long?)
 - poorly defined, short period
 - some sources just lump Jemdet Nasr in as the end of the Late Uruk period
 - sometimes called "protoliterate" period, since cuneiform was just developing and literacy was still limited mostly to accounting
 - writing improved and became more common
 - mass-produced pottery became still more common, made with the fast wheel, continuing a trend that started in the Uruk period
 - stone artwork continued
 - temple rebuilding continued
 - Jemdet Nasr burials: finally some clearer evidence of variation, suggesting some stratification
 - of 340 graves, 61 (about 20%) had one or two metal cups; 2 had numerous goods (the top less than 1%)
 - basically, this was a transitional period that is poorly known
 - it is identified by a style of ceramics at certain sites, but it is not clear that there was a separate period in which this style was used over a large area
 - or whether maybe it was a style that coexisted with other styles at some places and not others
 - in any case, we don't know much about it that is very distinct from the preceding and following periods
 - for our purposes you can generally jump directly from the Uruk period to the beginning of the Early Dynastic period, which follows Jemdet Nasr
- Origins of writing
 - Why is writing important?
 - storage of information, more detailed, exact, and voluminous than memory allows
 - transmission or access by different people at different times
 - that is, information can be transmitted and acted on without needing face-to-face contact
 - people involved don't need to be in the same place
 - or even dealing with the information at the same time
 - this opens up possibilities for much greater flexibility and efficiency
 - facilitates comparison, summary, analysis, impersonal consideration
 - written information is not affected by personality and presentation as much as spoken information is
 - and it can be re-read, the reader can jump back and forth, make comparisons, etc.
 - so presumably more complex information and decisions can be managed
 - allows a different kind of handling of complex ideas and data, the visual aspect of seeing it all on the page

- some people believe that information that is seen is processed differently from information that is heard
- implies formal training and specialists
- many definitions of civilization include writing as an important characteristic of civilization
- Denise Schmandt-Besserat: The token theory of the origin of writing
 - This explanation has its critics, but it is probably at least partially right
 - Clay tokens found at many neolithic sites around SW Asia
 - cones, disks, spheres, partial spheres, etc.
 - variable size, average around 2 cm (1 inch) high
 - example: Jarmo, 8,500 BC: a modest early agricultural village
 - 1,153 clay spheres, 206 disks, 106 cones found in excavations (1465 tokens total)
 - generally found in clusters of 15 or more
 - generally found in storage areas in houses
 - i.e. counters representing stored goods, herds, etc.?
 - also found at other sites, starting around the time of initial use of agriculture
 - found at sites that generally don't have much evidence of pastoralism
 - nor of trade
 - so if these tokens were the beginning of record keeping, it started with cultivating and storing cereals -- not keeping track of herds or trade
 - similar tokens continued in use for thousands of years, up to a bit after 2000 BC -- that is, some 6,500 years!
 - very stable for close to 5000 years until Uruk times, with only minor additions to 20-28 shapes and variants
 - In the Uruk period, many new complex shapes were added, also more incisions, appliques, etc.
 - May indicate increasing number of types of goods to record, due to imports, craft specialization, etc.
 - many of the new, more complex variants resemble later precuneiform symbols for manufactured goods
 - like bread, oil, beer, perfume, metal, spun fibers, garments
 - so the expansion of the token system probably reflected the increasing variety of goods made by craft specialists that had to be kept track of
 - The new, complex tokens were apparently limited to cities, not found in small hamlets
 - another hint that they may relate to things produced by specialized craftspeople who lived in the larger towns
 - also, at some point the tokens seem to have been extended to stand for numbers
 - this is suggested because some tokens seem to correspond to known precuneiform symbols for numbers
 - small cone=1, circle=10, larger cone=60, etc.
 - so the token system was already more complex than just one token standing for one item
 - In the Uruk period, two means of keeping groups of tokens together appeared

- pierced tokens
 - apparently to keep on strings
 - the knot of the string was covered with clay, which had one or more seal impressions pressed into it
- unpierced tokens were encased in a clay “envelope” (“bulla”, plural “bullae”)
 - most had two different seal impressions, suggesting transactions or contracts between two people
- both kinds of grouping were presumably to record a transaction or contract
 - such as giving a shipment of goods to someone to transport
 - the set of tokens would make it difficult to divert any items without being discovered
 - both plain and complex tokens were pierced and put in bullae; both grouping systems were used for both simple and complex tokens
 - although most bullae contained mostly plain tokens
- problem with bullae: you had to break them open to verify the contents, and once opened, they were no longer sealed and tamperproof
- so they began marking the bullae on the outside by pressing the tokens (or similar ones) into the clay
 - in some examples, the tokens inside fit the impressions outside perfectly
 - but most examples have representations of the tokens made with a finger or stylus (probably a cut reed or wooden stick)
- with the outside marked, the tokens inside the bullae were not really necessary
- so they gradually stopped bothering with the tokens at all, using just the impressions on small clay slabs, or “tablets”, to record the information
- the symbols became more complex, and writing emerged
- so the emergence of a complex economy drove the development of writing
- Earliest “writing” appeared around 3400 BC, beginning of Late Uruk period
 - written on clay tablets
- signs were initially made by scratching lines into the damp clay: this was Uruk period “pre-cuneiform”
 - fewer than half were clearly pictographic: hand, head, barley, etc.
 - from the beginning, more than half were totally abstract
 - even in Uruk times, already some phonetic signs, based on monosyllabic words
 - only some can be read, by extrapolating back from later, better understood cuneiform
 - Uruk period pre-cuneiform used at least 1,500 different signs
- Over the next 500 years, the pictographic system was simplified
 - by the Early Dynastic period (2900 BC - 2373 BC), it had developed into cuneiform
 - cuneiform symbols are modifications of the symbols, made by pressing a pointed stylus, rather than dragging it; the impressions give a “cuneiform” (wedge-shaped) look
 - it was faster to write by pressing cuneiform symbols than scratching pictographic symbols
 - but the pictographic quality of the signs was lost; they became very abstract
 - the number of signs declined to around 700 signs
 - read left to right, top to bottom, in columns

- a much later version of cuneiform was “cracked” by intense study of a tri-lingual inscription of the Persian king Darius I, in 516 BC
 - Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian
 - this allowed epigraphers (writing experts) to work backwards to decipher the earlier forms of cuneiform, and some of the precuneiform symbols
- the symbols were initially for numbers, nouns, and a few adjectives
 - they were for accounting records
- later, additional syllabic signs were invented to add other elements of language
- an early common application was for contracts
 - sometimes sealed in a clay envelope with the same text written on the outside
 - continuing the traditional bulla concept of verification
- an example of fully developed cuneiform writing (this example is actually later, one of the “Amarna letters” found in Egypt, around 1400s BC)
 - “Shawardata, prince of Hebron, stands alone and needs a large force to rescue him.”
- context and content of Uruk writing
 - tablets are found in temples
 - and in some private houses, associated with seals and sealings
 - suggesting that it was mostly related to storage and trade
 - the most common signs are bread, beer, sheep, cattle, clothing
 - again, suggestive of storage and transaction records
 - incidentally, note the difference between cuneiform writing and the signs (sometimes including some cuneiform) on seals
 - seals are used over and over to make a repetitive ID mark, like a signature or a rubber stamp with your name on it
 - some have writing on them, some don’t
 - the content of the writing is secondary; the point is the identification of the user
 - this could be done by an abstract symbol, a coat of arms, etc., with no need for recording speech
 - an essential feature of writing is that it is flexible, able to record a wide variety of different statements
 - not just identify an individual
 - the vast bulk of pre-cuneiform and cuneiform writing is on tablets
 - which record accounts, records, letters, and practice work by scribes in training
 - these are different from the seals, in that they express different information in every phrase, rather than standing for the same thing over and over
 - So: writing developed out of recordkeeping and contracts for storage, transportation, and exchange of goods
 - and continued to be used mostly for that
 - these tablets with accounts and administrative records are mostly found in archive rooms
 - initially archives were only in temples
 - later, as palaces arose, they too had archives
 - as time passed, it was gradually extended to other uses like
 - diplomacy (such as letters between kings)

- law (such as land ownership agreements, codes of crimes and punishments)
- recording myths, poetry, etc. (the Gilgamesh epic and others)
- it remained a highly specialized skill that was formally taught with standardized exercises and practice texts
- this formal training implies a close control of esoteric knowledge (the method of reading and writing)