

## **Mesopotamia: The origins of writing**

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- Jemdet Nasr (3100 - 2900 BC)
  - poorly defined, probably 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, sphere=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”
  - Uruk period pre-cuneiform used at least 1,500 different signs
  - only some can be read, by extrapolating back from later, better understood 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
- 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)