CUNEIFORM

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Cuneiform

- **Cuneiform** was one of the earliest systems of **writing**, invented by Sumerians in ancient Mesopotamia.
- It is distinguished by its wedge-shaped marks on clay tablets, made by means of a blunt reed for a stylus.
- The term **cuneiform** comes from cuneus, Latin word for "wedge".

- The cuneiform writing system is not an alphabet, and it doesn't have letters. Instead it used between 600 and 1,000 characters to write words (or parts of them) or syllables (or parts of them).
- The two main languages written in Cuneiform are Sumerian and Akkadian (from ancient Iraq)
- The first stage used elementary pictures that were soon also used to record sounds. Amazingly, cuneiform continued to be used until the first century AD,

Pictograms

- Originally, pictograms were drawn on clay tablets in vertical columns with a pen made from a sharpened reed stylus, or incised in stone. This early style lacked the characteristic wedge-shape of the strokes.
- Certain signs to indicate names ofGods, countries, cities, vessels, birds, trees, and so forth, are known as "determinants," and were the Sumerian signs of the terms in question, added as a guide for the reader. Proper names continued to be usually written in purely ideographic fashion.

- From about 2900 B.C.E., many pictographs began to lose their original function, and a given sign could have various meanings depending on context. The sign inventory was reduced from some 1,500 signs to some 600 signs, and writing became increasingly phonological. Determinative signs were re-introduced to avoid ambiguity.

Cuneiform

The Sumerian script was adapted for the writing of the Akkadian, Elamite, Hittite and Hurrian languages

It inspired the Old Persian and Ugaritic national alphabets. Although it then disappeared when these cultures faded and new scripts, such as the Phoenician alphabet developed, numerous clay tablets, stelae (such as those upon which the Code of Hammurabi is written), and even the sides of cliffs (such as those containing the Behistun inscription) with cuneiform writings remained.

Discovered by archaeologists and deciphered by the efforts of a series of linguists, cuneiform inscriptions provide valuable insights into culture of the past.

Archaic cuneiform

- In the mid-third millennium, the direction of writing was changed from columns running downwards and signs were written from left to right in horizontal rows . At the same time, a new wedge-tipped stylus was used which was pushed into the clay, producing wedge-shaped signs. These two developments made writing quicker and easier. By adjusting the relative position of the tablet to the stylus, the writer could use a single tool to make a variety of impressions.
- Cuneiform tablets could be baked by heating to provide a permanent record, or they could be recycled if permanence was not needed. Many of the clay tablets found by archaeologists were preserved because they were fired when attacking armies burned the building in which they were kept.
- The script was also widely used to record the achievements of the ruler in whose honor the monument had been erected.

Akkadian cuneiform

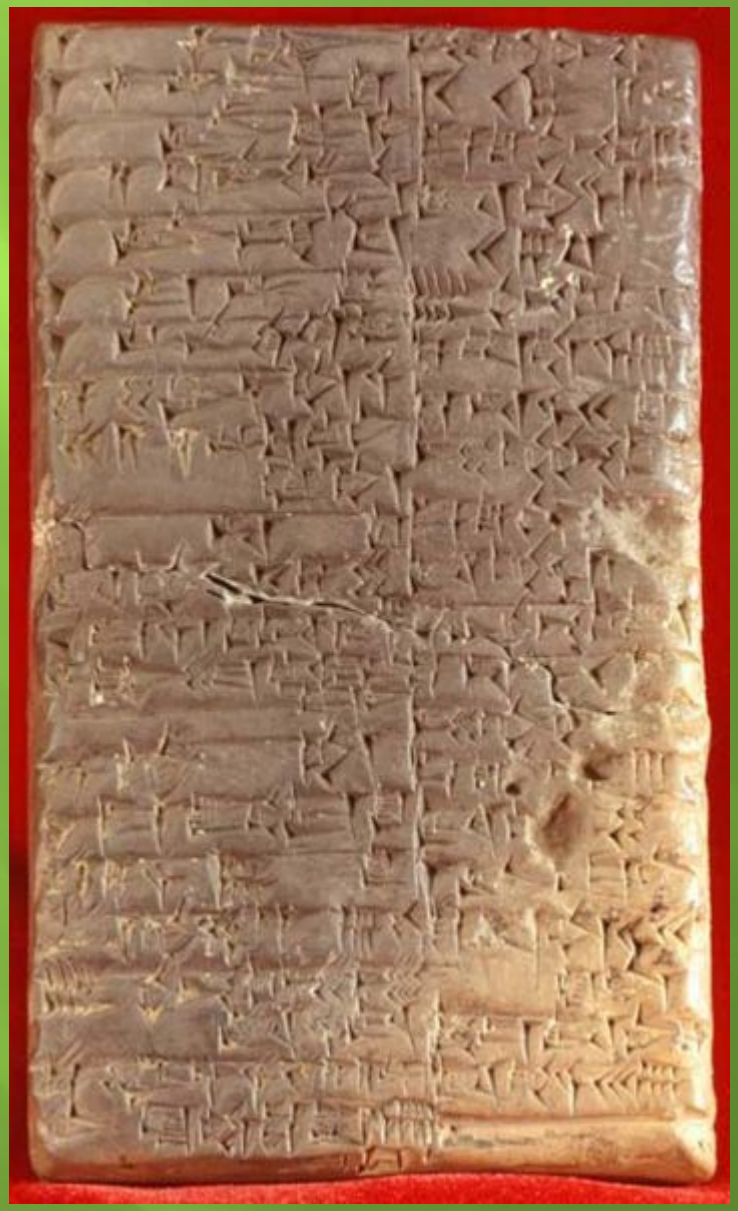
The archaic cuneiform script was adopted by the Akkadians from c. 2500 B.C.E., and by 2000 B.C.E., had evolved into Old Assyrian cuneiform, with many modifications to Sumerian orthography.

The Semitic equivalents for many signs became distorted or abbreviated to form new "phonetic" values, because the syllabic nature of the script as refined by the Sumerians was unintuitive to Semitic speakers.

Typical signs usually have in the range of about five to ten wedges, while complex ligatures can consist of twenty or more (although it is not always clear if a ligature should be considered a single sign or two collated but still distinct signs)

- Most later adaptations of Sumerian cuneiform preserved at least some aspects of the Sumerian script. Written Akkadian included phonetic symbols from the Sumerian syllabary, together with logograms that were read as whole words. Many signs in the script were polyvalent, having both a syllabic and logographic meaning.

Assyrian cuneiform



Assyrian cuneiform

- This "mixed" method of writing continued through the end of the Babylonian and Assyrian empires, although there were periods when "purism" was in fashion and there was a more marked tendency to spell out the words laboriously, in preference to using signs with a phonetic complement. Yet even in those days, the Babylonian syllabary remained a mixture of ideographic and phonetic writing.
- In the Iron Age (c. tenth to sixth centuries B.C.E.), Assyrian cuneiform was further simplified. From the sixth century, the Assyrian language was marginalized by Aramaic, written in the Aramaean alphabet, but Neo-Assyrian cuneiform remained in use in literary tradition well into Parthian times.

Derived scripts

- The complexity of the system prompted the development of a number of simplified versions of the script. Old Persian was written in a subset of simplified cuneiform characters known today as Old Persian cuneiform. It formed a semi-alphabetic syllabary, using far fewer wedge strokes than Assyrian used, together with a handful of logograms for frequently occurring words like "god" and "king." The Ugaritic language was written using the Ugaritic alphabet, a standard Semitic style alphabet written using the cuneiform method.
- However, the influence of cuneiform died away, and was completely abandoned as a style around the end of the sixth century. The cultures that used cuneiform disappeared. As other styles of written language populated the region, particularly the Phoenician alphabet with whose efficiency cuneiform could not compete, all use and knowledge of cuneiform disappeared. It remained a mystery to many people until scholars in the nineteenth century worked to decipher it.

- Early European travelers to Mesopotamian area noticed carved cuneiform inscriptions and were intrigued.
- Carsten Niebuhr copied them in the eighteenth century, publishing them after his return to Europe in 1767.
- In 1802, Georg Friedrich Grotefend realized the introductory lines were likely to contain names and titles and began the process of decipherment.
- Yet, it was not until 1835, when Henry Rawlinson, a British East India Company army officer, visited the Behistun Inscriptions in Iran that a breakthrough in understanding was made. Carved in the reign of King Darius of Persia (522 B.C.E.–486 B.C.E.), they consisted of identical texts in the three official languages of the empire: Old Persian, Akkadian (language used in Babylon), and Elamite. The Behistun inscription was most significant in the decipherment of cuneiform.