

Cuneiform Information Sheet

Western Asia and Egypt played an extraordinary role in the development of writing. Mesopotamia produced the earliest known writing system, cuneiform (ca. 3300 BCE), as the need for record keeping increased in the developing cities. Egyptian hieroglyphics followed soon afterward. Around 2000 BCE the earliest alphabetic script, a much simpler form of writing, originated in Canaan (modern Israel, Palestine, and coastal Lebanon).

All three of the major early scripts of southwest Asia began with signs that were largely pictorial, most of them readily recognizable. But drawing detailed pictures as signs was a difficult and slow task. So in each case the signs came to be written in a simplified and standardized way that allowed the scribe to write more easily and quickly. After a few hundred years, the signs hardly resembled the original pictures from which they had begun.

Cuneiform script consists of combinations of triangular-shaped wedges impressed upon clay tablets. [The word cuneiform means “wedge-shaped.”] More than half a million tablets have been discovered and are the source of much of our knowledge of Mesopotamian civilization.

The earliest cuneiform signs each represented a complete word. To write words that represented actions and ideas—things that could not be drawn—the signs began to be used about 2900 BCE for their phonetic value as well as their whole word meaning. Thus the gu sign, which meant “ox,” could also be used for its phonetic value “gu” in whatever word contained that syllable. From that time on any type of speech could be written down.

Countless business and governmental accounts and inventories, as well as records of offerings to the gods, lists of workers and pay schedules, records of loans and payments, rental receipts and numerous other documents of administrative information are found on cuneiform tablets. These texts have provided scholars with a great deal of insight into Mesopotamian governmental structures and the economic development of the culture.

Source:

Labels, Ancient Mesopotamian Exhibit, Spurlock Museum, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign