NO PREP

Cuneiform

The World's First Writing System

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Name: Period: Date:

Cuneiform: The World's First Writing System

From Tokens to Tablets

Writing did not begin with poetry or religion. It began with accounting. Sometime around 3400 BCE, Sumerian merchants and temple administrators in the city of Uruk faced a practical problem: they needed to keep track of goods. Sheep delivered to the temple storehouse. Jars of oil owed by one merchant to another. Rations distributed to workers. The quantities were too large and the transactions too numerous to rely on memory alone. The first solution was physical: small clay tokens of different shapes representing different goods. A cone might mean a jar of oil. A disc might represent a sheep. These tokens were sealed in clay envelopes, and impressions of the tokens were pressed into the outside of the envelope so the contents could be known without breaking it open. It was a short conceptual leap from there to realizing that the impressions alone were enough — that you did not need the tokens inside if the marks on the outside conveyed the same information. Marks on a flat clay surface replaced tokens in a sealed ball. Writing had

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How Cuneiform Actually Worked

The earliest cuneiform signs were pictographic: a drawing of a head meant 'head,' a drawing of a foot meant 'foot' or 'to walk.' But pictures are slow to draw, and the rounded shapes of pictographs were difficult to press into clay efficiently. Over centuries, the signs were rotated and simplified into combinations of wedge-shaped marks, which is what 'cuneiform' means in Latin: wedge-shaped. A scribe pressed a cut reed stylus into a damp clay tablet at different angles to produce these wedges, building up complex signs from simple marks. By around 2600 BCE, cuneiform had evolved from a purely pictographic system into one that could represent sounds as well as objects. This was the phonetic breakthrough: a sign could stand for a

syllable, not just a thing. This allowed scribes to write verbs, names, abstract concepts, and eventually entire texts of literature and law. The system was complex (there were hundreds of signs, and a fully trained scribe had to master all of them), but it was capable of expressing almost anything a human mind could think. Cuneiform was written on clay tablets that were then dried in the sun or fired in a kiln for permanent records. Tablets could be recycled by wetting them again before they dried, making clay an ideal writing medium: cheap, abundant, and reusable. The durability of fired clay is why we have so many Mesopotamian texts today. Tablets baked in the fires that destroyed ancient buildings survived where papyrus, wood, and cloth did not.

What Was Written: Mostly Receipts, Occasionally Genius

The vast majority of cuneiform tablets are administrative records, the ancient equivalent of spreadsheets. They record grain deliveries, cattle inventories, ration lists, land transactions, debt contracts, and court cases. For every tablet containing a hymn to a goddess or a line of epic poetry, there are thousands recording that a certain farmer delivered a certain number of sheep to a certain temple on a certain date. This is actually useful to archaeologists: the mundane records reveal the economic structures, labor systems, and daily rhythms of Mesopotamian life in extraordinary detail. But among the routine accounting, cuneiform scribes also preserved masterpieces. The Epic of Gilgamesh (the world's oldest surviving long-form narrative) was written in cuneiform on twelve tablets. Hymns to the goddess Inanna, written by the world's first named author (a priestess named Enheduanna, around 2300 BCE), survive in cuneiform. Mathematical texts show that Babylonian mathematicians understood what we now call the Pythagorean theorem more than a thousand years before Pythagoras. Medical texts describe symptoms and treatments. Astronomical records track the movements of planets with impressive precision.

Deciphering Cuneiform: The Behistun Inscription

After the last cuneiform tablets were written around 100 CE, the script went entirely unread for more than 1,700 years. Medieval scholars knew the wedge-shaped marks existed — travelers had noticed them at ancient sites — but no one could read them. The key to decipherment was a monument carved into a cliff face near the town of Bisotun in modern Iran: the Behistun Inscription, commissioned by

the Persian king Darius I around 520 BCE. The Behistun Inscription told the story of Darius's rise to power in three languages: Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian cuneiform. Henry Rawlinson, a British army officer stationed in Persia in the 1830s and 1840s, risked his life dangling from ropes to copy the inscription off the cliff face. Since Old Persian had been partially deciphered from other sources, Rawlinson used it as a key to unlock the Babylonian text alongside it — just as the Rosetta Stone had unlocked Egyptian hieroglyphics a few decades earlier. By 1857, cuneiform was readable, and the world gained access to a library of hundreds of thousands of tablets that had been silently waiting for millennia.

Key Information: Cuneiform

Detail	Information
Origin	Developed in Uruk, Sumer, c. 3400 BCE
Original Purpose	Administrative record-keeping (accounting for goods)
Writing Surface	Wet clay tablets, pressed with a cut reed stylus
Script Type	Combined pictographic and phonetic (syllabic) signs
Number of Signs	Hundreds; required years of scribal training to master
First Named Author	Enheduanna (c. 2300 BCE), priestess and poet
Famous Text	Epic of Gilgamesh; Hammurabi's Code; mathematical and astronomical records
Decipherment	Henry Rawlinson, 1830s-1857, using the Behistun Inscription

Case Study: Tablet Eleven, or What George Smith Found

George Smith was a bank note engraver by trade, but he spent every spare hour at the British Museum studying the cuneiform tablets that had arrived from the excavation of Nineveh. He had taught himself to read the wedge-shaped script, which was unusual enough — most scholars had university training he never had. In December 1872, Smith was sorting through a box of fragments when something stopped him. The tablet in his hand described a great flood. A god warning a man to build a boat. The boat loaded with animals. A bird sent out to find dry land. A raven that did not return. Smith had read the Book of Genesis. Every educated Victorian had. He recognized what he was holding: a flood story. An ancient flood story. A flood story carved into a clay tablet dug from beneath the ruins of a palace that fell in 612 BCE, written in a language that had been unreadable for 1,700 years. 'I am the first man to read that text after more than two thousand years of oblivion,' he reportedly said, and then — according to witnesses — he stood up from his chair, walked around the room, and began to undress. No one has fully explained why. Perhaps there are moments that require an unconventional response. He published his findings in 1872. The discovery that a flood narrative existed in Mesopotamian literature before the Bible was written caused an international sensation and raised profound questions about the origins of scripture that scholars are still debating today.

1. George Smith's discovery that a Mesopotamian flood narrative predated the biblical account of Noah caused enormous public controversy in 1872. Why does the existence of this earlier text matter to historians and archaeologists studying the ancient world?

2. Smith was self-taught in cuneiform and worked as an engraver, not a university professor. Based on the reading's discussion of what cuneiform tablets contain, what qualities would have been most important for someone trying to decipher and interpret such a complex writing system?

Multiple Choice

1. Cuneiform writing was originally invented primarily to:

    a) Keep track of goods and administrative transactions

    b) Preserve epic poetry for future generations

    c) Record religious hymns and prayers for temple ceremonies

    d) Communicate military orders during wartime

2. The Behistun Inscription was crucial to deciphering cuneiform because it:

    a) Was written by the Sumerian king Sargon in plain language as historical records

    b) Contained the same text in multiple languages, including one already understood

    c) Contained a complete list of every cuneiform sign and its meaning

    d) Was the oldest cuneiform text ever found

3. Why have so many cuneiform tablets survived to the present day?

    a) Clay tablets were waterproofed with a special Mesopotamian resin

    b) Tablets were carefully stored in underground chambers designed to last thousands of years

    c) Clay tablets baked by fires that destroyed ancient buildings became permanently hardened

    d) Sumerian scribes intentionally buried tablets for preservation

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Pictograph	A) Akkadian priestess and poet, recognized as the world's first named author (c. 2300 BCE)
2. ___ Stylus	B) A written sign that represents a whole word or concept rather than a sound
3. ___ Logogram	C) A trilingual rock carving commissioned by Darius I that became the key to deciphering cuneiform
4. ___ Behistun Inscription	D) A cut reed tool used to press wedge-shaped marks into wet clay tablets
5. ___ Enheduanna	E) A simplified drawing used as a written symbol representing an object or concept

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The word 'cuneiform' comes from the Latin word for _____, describing the shape of the marks pressed into clay.

2. Henry _____ deciphered cuneiform in the 1830s-1850s by studying the Behistun Inscription carved into a cliff in Persia.

3. The earliest cuneiform tablets were not literary works but _____ records tracking goods, rations, and business transactions.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain the evolution of cuneiform from its origins as clay tokens to a fully phonetic writing system capable of recording literature. What were the key steps in that development?

2. The reading notes that most cuneiform tablets are administrative records rather than literature or history. Why are these 'boring' accounting tablets actually valuable to archaeologists?

3. What does it mean that cuneiform was unreadable for more than 1,700 years, and why does the decipherment of dead scripts matter for our understanding of history?