

How Writing Began in Ancient Mesopotamia



Course roadmap: from pre-literate accounting to cuneiform and its legacies



Earliest known writing emerged in southern Iraq, around 3200–3350 BCE



Central questions: What problems did writing solve? Who used it?



Evidence base: clay tablets, archaeology, modern decipherment, museum collections



Three millennia of texts, from Uruk to the fall of Babylon



Setting the Stage: Geography, Chronology, and Key Terms

Big Picture

- From pre-literate accounting to full writing systems and their legacies
- Earliest writing emerged in southern Iraq around 3200–3350 BCE
- Key questions: What problems did writing solve? Who used it?
- Evidence: clay tablets, archaeological context, decipherment, museum collections

Key Terms and Context

- Mesopotamia, 'land between the rivers,' in modern-day Iraq
- Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians
- Timeline: Uruk (c. 4000–3100 BCE), Jemdet Nasr (c. 3200–3000 BCE)
- Writing vs. proto-writing: proto-cuneiform recorded data, not speech



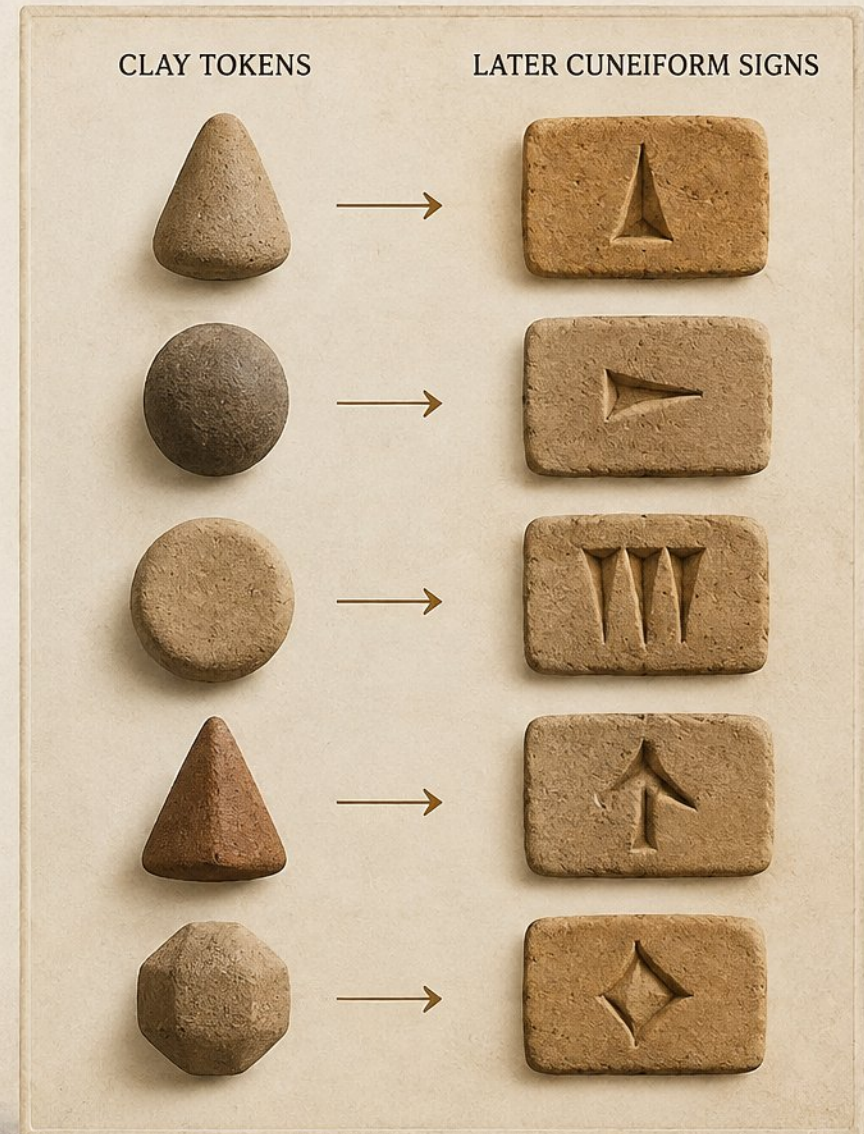
Uruk
(c. 4000–3100 BCE)

Jemdet Nasr
(c. 3200–3000 BCE)



Before Writing: Counting, Tokens, and Memory

- Small geometric clay 'tokens' appear in the 10th millennium BCE.
- Schmandt-Besserat: tokens were mnemonic devices for agricultural accounting.
- She argued token shapes evolved directly into early cuneiform signs.
- Bennison-Chapman: tokens were multi-functional, not one unified accounting system.
- Tokens persisted alongside writing, as at Neo-Assyrian Ziyaret Tepe.



From Envelopes to Impressed Signs: The Mechanics of Early Recording

- Tokens sealed in clay envelopes (bullae) hid their contents, so shapes were impressed on the surface
- Impressed marks duplicated the enclosed token shapes, creating continuity between objects and signs
- Numerical tablets: flattened clay with numerals and seal impressions — the missing link to writing
- Numero-ideographic tablets added logograms for sheep, jars, fruits, and textiles
- Envelopes established direct continuity between token shapes and the first writing signs



The Uruk Phenomenon and the First Tablets

- Uruk: roughly 250 hectares, temple economies, centralized storage
- Earliest proto-cuneiform tablets: Uruk IV–III (c. 3350–3000 BCE)
- Content: commodity lists, rations, labor records, receipts
- Corpus: about 6,000 tablets, over 38,000 lines of text
- Mostly administrative (around 85%), not literature or law
- Debate: full writing or proto-writing that did not encode speech?



Visual Precursors: Seals, Motifs, and the Making of Signs

- Cylinder seals introduced c. 3700 BCE, rolled onto clay tablets and devices
- Pre-literate seal motifs anticipate fundamental proto-cuneiform signs
- Fringed textiles and netted vessels become key sign forms
- Seals and signs worked together to record temple deliveries
- Shared shapes reveal a multimedia path to writing



From Pictures to Signs: How Cuneiform Worked

- Reed stylus pressed wedge-shaped signs into wet clay; Latin *cuneus*, 'wedge,' gives cuneiform its name
- Key principles: pictographic origins, rebus principle, phonetic signs, and determinatives
- Earliest signs pictured countable goods: grain, fish, and animals
- Rebus principle: a picture of an 'eye' could also mean 'I'
- System spread from Sumerian to Akkadian, then Elamite, Hittite, Hurrian, and Urartian



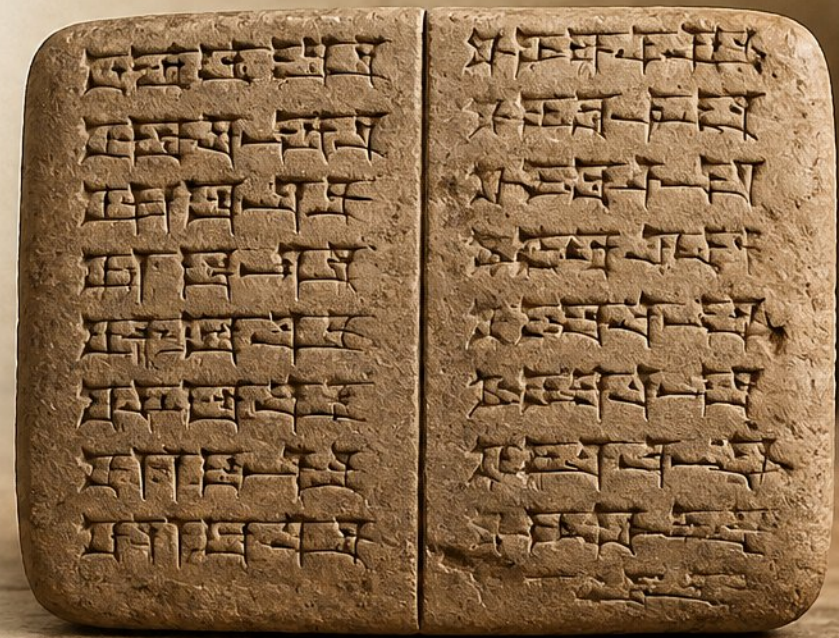
Who Wrote and Why: Scribes, Temples, and Palaces

- Scribes trained for temple and palace households
- Administrative genres: receipts, loans, contracts, inventories, ration lists
- Writing served state control, taxation, and elite identity
- Literacy was rare: under one percent could read and write
- Eduba: school, library, and scriptorium in one



The Scribal School: Curriculum and Daily Life

- The *eduba*, or 'house of tablets,' combined school, library, and scriptorium
- Elementary curriculum: writing techniques, noun lists, sign lists, then Sumerian
- Type II tablets pair teacher's model with student's copy, revealing learning sequences
- Texts like *Eduba A* describe recitation, written exercises, and punishment
- House F at Nippur shows curriculum varied by school and teacher



Beyond Accounts: Literature, Law, and Science

- Literary texts: hymns, proverbs, epics — including the Epic of Gilgamesh
- Law collections: Ur-Nammu and Hammurabi codes, building on earlier practice
- Scholarly texts: medicine, astronomy, divination, and mathematics
- Library of Ashurbanipal: a model of systematic text collection
- Scribes copied canonical works for millennia in temples and palaces



The Epic of Gilgamesh: Reconstructing a Lost Masterpiece

- George Smith recognized flood-narrative fragments in the Kuyunjik tablets, 1872
- Tablet V, acquired by the Sulaymaniyah Museum in 2011, added about 20 lines
- The Cedar Forest episode shows Humbaba as more man than monster
- Enkidu's lament adds ecological regret to the heroes' victory
- AI and digital corpora (eBL) accelerate fragment identification and reconstruction



Decipherment and Discovery: Reading the Past



Grotefend identified about ten Old Persian signs by 1802



Rawlinson copied the trilingual Behistun inscription, 1830s–1840s



Hincks showed signs had multiple readings, both logographic and phonetic



1857 Royal Asiatic Society test: four scholars translated the same text



Modern philology: sign lists, digital corpora, ongoing translation

Hands-On with Evidence: Tablets, Museums, and Digital Resources



Read a tablet: shape, signs, seal impressions, archaeological context



Photo archives: Wikimedia Commons hosts thousands of open tablet images



Digital libraries: CDLI (400,000+ records), eBL, Ashmolean, Yale, Penn Museum



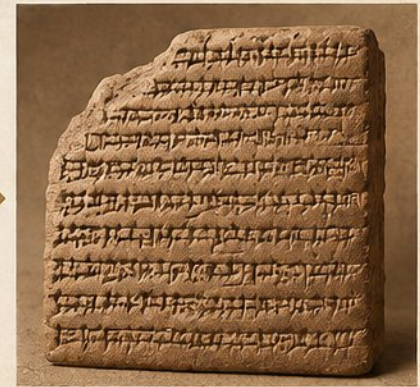
Classroom activities: make clay tablets, match signs, try simple translations



Critically evaluate 'first writing' claims in news and documentaries



Review and Assessment: Key Takeaways



Recap: token accounting → proto-cuneiform → cuneiform → literary and scholarly texts



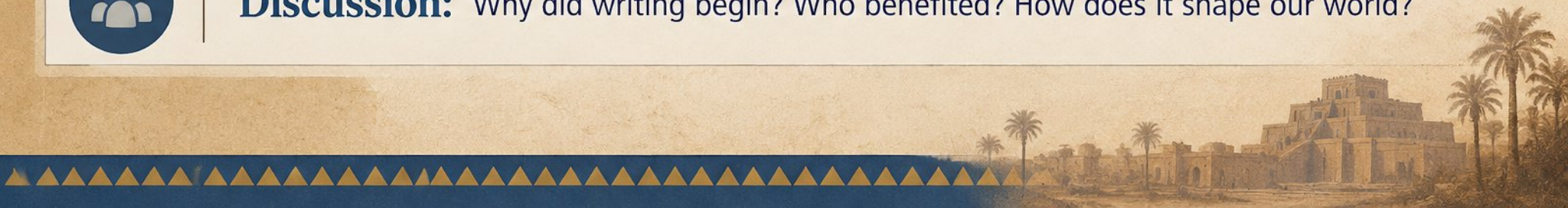
Key terms: bulla, stylus, rebus principle, determinative, eduba, Ashurbanipal



Skill check: identify signs, describe a tablet's function, explain writing's development



Discussion: Why did writing begin? Who benefited? How does it shape our world?



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