

STONE TABLETS

The advent of written communication changed the world forever and helped to create civilization as we know it. At first, the written word was used mainly for basic accounting and record keeping. As writing skills evolved, people began to write stories, keep track of historical events, and record poems and songs. All these expressions of thought and words made up our written history and aided progression to where we are today.



Tally of goats from Tello, south of Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq)

CUNEIFORM

Cuneiform is one of the earliest forms of writing, first appearing circa 3200 BC in the Middle East around Mesopotamia. It is believed to be a form created by the ancient Sumerians for basic accounting and record keeping purposes.



Cuneiform was made up of wedge shaped images, along with circular shapes and simple lines. The script was written into damp clay with a **stylus** (usually a reed). After drying in the sun, the tablet could be read and passed along or stored for record keeping.



CUNEIFORM SCHOOL



In ancient Mesopotamia, schooling began at an early age in the **tablet house**, where most of the initial instruction and discipline was conducted by elder students known as “big brothers.”

The first thing a boy (and very rarely a girl) had to learn was how to make a tablet and to handle the stylus which made the impressions in the clay. After learning the basic cuneiform signs, students went on to learn thousands of different Sumerian words. The teacher would write out some lines on one side of a tablet and the student would study them then turn over the tablet to reproduce what the teacher had written. After completing their training, students became **dubstar** or **scribes**, which was considered a privileged class.

Old Babylonian cuneiform tablet, ca. 1900-1700 BC,
British Museum

LIBRARY OF ASHURBANIPAL

The Library of Ashurbanipal was the first systematic library in the Middle East. Established by the last 'great' king of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, Ashurbanipal, the library was built between 668 and 627 BC and its ruins were discovered in the 1850s. Thousands of historical inscriptions, letters, and administrative, legal, divinatory, magical, medical, literary and lexical texts were found at this site. This treasure house of learning has held unparalleled importance to the modern study of the ancient Near East ever since the first fragments were excavated.



Modern Ashurbanipal Library, Mosul, Iraq



Cuneiform tablet of King Ashurbanipal

THE SUMERIAN SHAKESPEARE

Enheduanna, high priestess of the Sumerian moon god Nanna and daughter of Akkadian king Sargon, lived in Ancient Mesopotamia around 2300 BC. She is credited for being the first individually named author in history. Her known works comprised of 42 temple hymns, including this excerpt describing the Gishbanda Temple Of Ningishzida:

ancient place

*set deep in the mountain
artfully*

dark shrine frightening and red place

safely placed in a field

no one can fathom your mighty hair-raising path

Gishbanda

the neck-stock the fine-eyed net

the foot-shackling netherworld knot

your restored high wall is massive

like a trap



Enheduanna Disk (depicts Enheduanna 2nd on the left)

EPIC OF GILGAMESH

This fragment is from the Library of Ashurbanipal and is a part of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, considered to be the first epic ever recorded. It tells the story of a legendary ruler of Uruk and his search for immortality. This fragment describes the meeting of Gilgamesh with Utnapishtim, who has been pre-warned of a flood from the gods. It is currently housed at the British Museum in London.



MAYA STELAE

During 900-300 BC, MesoAmericans (current day Mexico and Central America) wrote on stone chunks, which were usually rectangular in shape. Their pictorial form of writing used images (**glyphs**) to represent words or syllables. Deciphering this type of writing did not begin until the 1830s when scholars began using the *Dresden Codex* to crack the Mayan numbering system.

Stelae were large banner stones (*lakam-tuun*) often placed at the base of large pyramids and what would have been very public places during that time. Glyphs were carved into the stone and used to communicate a ruler's power and beliefs. Both the Olmec and Maya people used this form of carved writing.



A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

Deciphering Mayan glyphs may seem confusing to anyone used to a language made up of words, but it is really no different than understanding familiar symbols that we use every day.

For example, if you see this image...



you know it means “to throw away” or “trash.” Understanding what each glyph means allows researchers to study one of the oldest known civilizations.

ahaw (lord)	bih (road)	hok' (to take office)	k'al (twenty)	na (house)	tok' (flint)
akot (to dance)	chan (sky)	hoy (to bless, make proper)	k'awil (spirit)	nal (place)	tun (stone)
chan (snake)	hun (headband)	hun (one)	k'in (sun)	nik (flower)	tz'am (throne)
bak (bone, captive)	chum (to be seated)	iwal (“and then”)	k'u, k'ul (sacred, god)	pakal (shield)	wak (six)
bak (heron)	ha' (water)	kah (town, area)	k'uk' (quetzal)	sabak (ink)	way (companion spirit)
balam (jaguar)	hal (to manifest)	k'ak' (fire)	kun (seat, center)	sotz' (bat)	wink (man, person)
				sotz' (bat)	witz (mountain)

MAYA GLYPHS

Student guide:
www.famsi.org/research/pitts/MayaGlyphsBook1Sect1.pdf

