

The dawn of writing



The Oriental Institute in Chicago is currently running an exhibit about ancient writing entitled *Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond*. Showcased in this exhibit are a collection of ancient Sumerian artifacts. These artifacts are a collection of clay tablets with inscriptions on their surface, dating back around 5200 years ago. This time period is widely accepted to be the dawn of writing. This early writing does not resemble what we would recognize as writing today.

Instead of using an alphabet or a combination of symbols to represent a sound to encompass a thought or idea, early writing was done in a system which we call cuneiform. Cuneiform being the first form of writing is very primitive in comparison with what we recognize today. Whereas we would have a page full of elaborate combinations of letters to form words which we then organize into thoughts, cuneiform more resembles the simple drawings of a young person. These primitive forms of writing were more like doodles than an organized writing system. To an ancient Sumerian or Mesopotamian however these drawing would certainly have been a great human achievement. This is the first time in human history that man has been able to keep a record of the world around him and the happenings therein.

Cuneiform is done in soft clay with a bone or some other hard tool that could be used to make impressions in the surface.

The exhibit at the Oriental Institute in Chicago, which is part of the University of Chicago, demonstrates an interesting concept. It has always been widely accepted that writing originally started in the east and then spread westward toward Egypt. This exhibit showcases artifacts and new discoveries that discount this theory. It is now the belief of many in the historical and

archaeological communities that written language in fact evolved separately and simultaneously in the Egyptian region. The article in the New York Times states that ??? until the 1950??™s experts had believed that the Sumerians had influenced the Egyptians, spreading the use of writing westward. But in the 1950??™s Gunther Dryer, a German archaeologist, found writing on bone and ivory tags in an elaborate, probably royal burial site at Abydos in Southern Egypt.

The depth at which they were buried and subsequent carbon tests proved the works to be as old as Sumerian works. Because the marks were different in style, scholars believe that the Egyptians developed their own writing system independently.??? Some of the artifacts in the exhibit are from the late prewriting stage. These artifacts are small clay envelopes which were sealed with small clay balls inside. These envelopes were likely used as an invoice. They would likely have been sent along with trade goods. Each ball representing an item due to be delivered served as a system of checks and balances to ensure that the shipment arrived whole and intact.

In the book *The Alphabet Effect*, Robert K. Logan states, ??? Each quantity of a commodity was designated by its own unique, specially shaped token. The system, which began with twenty-four tokens sometime around 8000 B. C. , grew to more than two hundred different types by 3300 B. C. The shapes included spheres, discs, cylinders, cones, biconoids, ovoids, triangles and tetrahedrons and were further differentiated with markings, incisions, and punched holes??? (Logan 27). The shapes and markings on these tokens

served as visual representations of the objects they served to account for making them ??? man??™s first full literary metaphors??? (Logan 28).

This simple form of documentation transmitted information over great distances and can be associated with the beginning of the dawn of writing. The clay envelopes were needed to keep the tokens secure and to make sure that they were not tampered with. One would assume that it was only a matter of time before the Sumerian officials realized that there was no need for the tokens to be inside the envelope at all.

If the markings were inscribed on the outside of the envelope the same purpose would be served. This realization is likely what brought on the idea of the first written records. These inscribed envelopes were not however the first forms of writing, instead they were more of a catalogue. A numerical representation of the commodities and not words representing sounds to designate the objects. Not long after the Sumerians discovered that they could document items with symbols on these clay tablets the representation of phonetic elements became desirable. The Sumerians were the first civilization to experiment with and fully implement a system of pictographs to express their thoughts. The Egyptians were the second to create a phonetic system not long after the Sumerians. There was likely a slow transfer from these pictographs to phonetic symbols.

Certain pictographs became phonetic representations. Robert K. Logan states: The Sumerian words for arrow and life are both pronounced ??? ti???. As an example, let us consider the following pictograph for the word arrow, ^ . This pictograph can also be used phonetically by adding a determinative

sign, \rightarrow , so that the sign \rightarrow no longer indicates arrow but rather the word that sounds like arrow (\rightarrow ti \rightarrow), namely life.

This device was extended to polysyllabic words as well. Let \rightarrow \rightarrow and \rightarrow \rightarrow be pictograms for the English words four and sea. Let \rightarrow s use the determinative sign, \rightarrow , to indicate that the pictograms should be treated as phonograms. The symbols \rightarrow \rightarrow , which would be read as four seas, becomes \rightarrow \rightarrow \rightarrow and is read as the polysyllabic word foresee. It was in this way that the Sumerians created their phonetic syllabary (31-32). Although during this period the Sumerian writing methods began changing from pictograms to a more linear writing method, they still had not achieved an elaborate alphabetical system of writing. The Egyptian language was first written towards the end of the fourth millennium B.

C. and it has become widely accepted that it is only predated by Sumerian. Even though the Sumerians developed written language first, the Egyptians still have kept a much more thorough record of history.

The roots of Ancient Egyptian can be traced back to a group of African and Near Eastern languages known as Afro-Asiatic or Hamito-Semitic. This group of languages \rightarrow have sufficient similarities in their grammar and vocabulary to suggest that they are derived from a common linguistic ancestor \rightarrow (Davies 78). Egyptian written language can be divided into 5 stages as defined by Davies: Old Egyptian The language of the inscriptions of the old kingdom (c. 2650-2135 B. C.) the period in which the first continuous texts appear. Middle Egyptian The idiom, in particular, of the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom (c.

2135-1785 B. C.); regarded as the 'classical' stage of the language, used in literary, religious and monumental inscriptions through to the Graeco-Roman Period. Very close to Old Egyptian in structure.

Late Egyptian The everyday language of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period (c. 1550-700 B. C.), as witnessed particularly in secular documents of the Ramesside Period (c. 1300-1080 B. C.); also found to some extent in literary and monumental inscriptions.

Very different from Old and Middle Egyptian, especially in its verbal structure. **Demotic** Vernacular successor of Late Egyptian, written in the script known as Demotic, attested from the beginning of the Late Period down to late Roman times (c. 700 B. C.-fifth century A. D.

). **Coptic** The final stage of the language, as written in the Coptic script from the third century A. D. onwards. The only stage of the language of which the vocalic structure is known and in which distinct dialects are recognizable. The two major dialects are: Sahidic, the standard literary dialect until the tenth century A. D.

, its place of origin uncertain, possibly Thebes or Memphis; and Bohairic, originally the dialect of the west Delta, which supplanted Sahidic as the official dialect in the eleventh century. Three writing styles were used during the Late Period; hieroglyphic, hieratic, and demotic. These three styles are superficially different from each other in appearance but actually represent the same writing system, hieratic and demotic being merely cursive derivatives of hieroglyphic (Davies 82). Coptic, a script based on the Greek alphabet, phased out the previous writing styles during the Roman

period. Hieroglyphic was the earliest form of writing in Egypt and first appeared in the predynastic period. Writing samples found during this era are represented in the form of short labels on stones and pottery.

Later samples of hieroglyphics are found as inscriptions on temple walls on the island of Philae in 394 A. D. Eventually, Hieroglyphics began to be used only in religious and monumental contexts as the hieratic written form was being used for a variety of writing texts. Hieroglyphics are best recognized as signs and pictorial characters. Most of these characters are ??? recognizable pictures of natural or man-made objects, which when carefully executed may exhibit fine detail and coloring although they are conventionalized in form and their color is not always realistic??? (Davies 82).

Even though hieroglyphics included picture-like signs it should not be confused with primitive ??? picture-writing???. Hieroglyphics, in a different way, is just as capable as the modern alphabet for communicating complex thoughts and ideas. This form of writing is known as a ??? mixed??? system in that some of the characters convey meaning while others convey sound. Hieroglyphics was an ever changing written language and symbols were adapted and discarded as needed.

Through these changes one can see how everyday tools, materials, transportation, and even weaponry evolved during the time of the Ancient Egyptians. It has been calculated that as many as 6000 Hieroglyphics were in use during the times of Ancient Egypt, however only about 1000 of those were used at any one time. Reading hieroglyphics also changed and evolved over time. It began as being written in columns and then later in horizontal

lines. Punctuation marks or spaces were not written and lines were read from right to left and top to bottom. In conclusion the dawn of the written language seems to have occurred simultaneously in separate regions of the world. It would take many more pages to discuss the evolution of writing in South America and Eastern Asia which developed independently of Sumerian and Egyptian writing methods.

Strangely enough these writing forms developed in much the same way. The evolution of human cognitive processes seems to be unaffected by race or region of the world. When discussing the birth of literary methods it would seem that all men were created equal. Works Cited Davies, W. V. ??? Egyptian Hieroglyphs.??? Reading the Past: Ancient Writing from Cuneiform to the Alphabet.

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