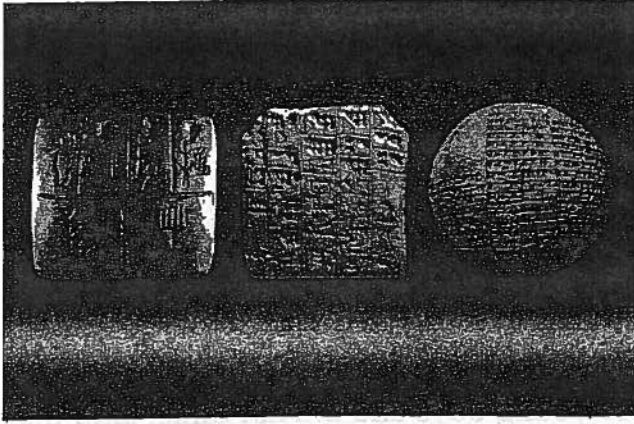


The Impact of Cuneiform on Sumerian Culture

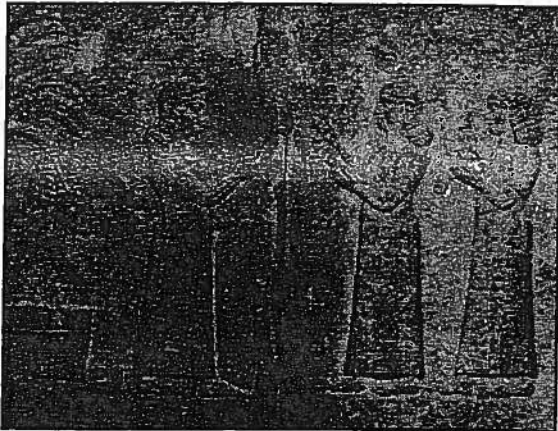


The Sumerians created what scholars believe to be the world's first highly developed written language, known as *cuneiform* (pronounced kyoo-NEE-a-form). Cuneiform evolved from two earlier, simpler stages of written language: *pictographs* and *ideographs*. Pictographs were simple pictures that represented real objects, such as a snake or water. The earliest written records appear to be lists that combine numbers and

pictographs, such as “12 cows.” Almost immediately, writers—or *scribes*—discovered that pictographs were too limiting because they could not represent complex concepts. Therefore, they developed *ideographs*. Ideographs were a single pictograph or a combination of pictographs that represented ideas or actions. For example, scribes formed the ideograph representing the action “to eat” by combining a pictograph of a mouth and a pictograph of a bowl. Scribes did not stop using the simpler pictographs, but used them alongside the more complex ideographs. Scribes created the symbols by using a sharpened reed to scratch them into pieces of wet clay. When the clay dried, the tablets became a permanent written record.

Around 2200 B.C.E., scribes began writing in horizontal rows instead of vertical columns. Scholars are not sure why scribes began writing in horizontal rows, although some believe it allowed scribes to write more neatly. Around 2900 B.C.E., scribes reduced the time it took to draw pictures for both pictographs and ideographs by drawing them using a series of simpler lines. Scribes quickly impressed these lines using a *stylus*, a sharpened reed. Scribes “capped” the end of the lines by pressing one corner of the stylus’ rectangular end into the clay to create a triangle-shaped (or wedge-shaped) impression. Nineteenth-century scholars later named the Sumerian script cuneiform, which means “wedge-shaped writing.” Around the same time that scribes started writing with a stylus, they also developed *phonograms*.

Phonograms were symbols representing the sound of a syllable in a word, such as “kur” or “li.” The invention of phonograms was the most important stage in the development of cuneiform. It allowed the Sumerians to greatly increase the number of words in their written vocabulary. By 1800 B.C.E., cuneiform contained more than 700 written symbols.



Only select Sumerians were taught how to write. Wealthy, young men—and a very few women—were trained to be scribes in Sumerian schools called *edubbas*. They started their training when they were young boys and did not finish until they were young men. The conditions in the *edubbas* were often harsh. Students sat in rows on hard, brick benches and had to practice writing cuneiform symbols over and over for many hours. They had to memorize the spellings and names of many animals,

plants, objects, and parts of the human body. The teachers used harsh discipline methods, such as beating their students with a rod, if students talked without permission or wrote poorly. In addition to learning how to write, the students also studied such subjects as story writing, grammar, and geography. Sumerian teachers also had their students practice writing by copying literature.



Before the development of cuneiform, Sumerians communicated stories verbally, or *orally*. People chanted or recited stories to the accompaniment of musical instruments such as the harp. The first Sumerian story ever written down is a 3,500-line poem called “The Epic of Gilgamesh.” The epic tells the story of a strong, handsome, and forceful king named Gilgamesh, who likely ruled in Mesopotamia sometime

between 2500 B.C.E. and 2000 B.C.E. In the poem, Gilgamesh—who is part God and part man—goes in search of *immortality*, or living forever, after his friend Enkidu is killed by the Gods. Because scribes recorded “The Epic of Gilgamesh” and other stories using cuneiform, scholars today have a richer understanding of Sumerian culture.