

# INTRODUCTION TO GRAPHIC COMMUNICATIONS Section No. CUNEIFORM WRITING 214

Cuneiform {kue-nee'-i-form} (from the Latin *cuneus*, "wedge," and *forma*, "shape") is a system of writing used for a number of ancient Near Eastern languages from about 3000 BC until the 1st century AD.

Primarily a Mesopotamian system, cuneiform was inscribed on clay, stone, metal, and other hard materials.

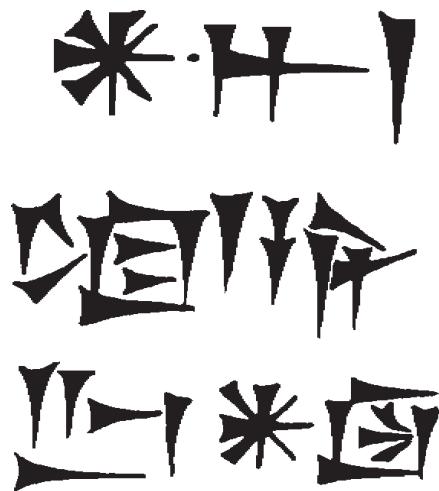
Cuneiform script originated in south Mesopotamia about 3000 BC, where it had developed from the earliest known form of writing, called pictographic writing, found on clay tablets at the ancient city of Uruk.

The earliest Sumerian pictographic writing, which seems to have been used for administrative purposes in compiling lists of objects, dates from the mid-4th millennium BC. In its latest transitional phase both ideograms and phonetic symbols were used. Gradual simplification and standardization of the pictures led to a linear style better suited to inscribing on clay, the principal material used for writing in the area.

During the 3rd millennium BC, the increased use of a writing stylus—made of reed, wood, or bone with a narrow, rectangular head—which was impressed into damp clay gave the symbols a more regular and properly wedge-shaped appearance. The straight side of the stylus head produced vertical, horizontal, or sloping lines that

terminated in a triangle at the end, where firm initial pressure was made. Other triangular symbols were obtained by impressing only the corner of the stylus.

At about the same time, it was found that writing could be done far more efficiently by changing the earlier system of working from right to left in columns to working from left to right in lines and by moving the angle of the signs 90 degrees, so that



*THE CUNEIFORM ALPHABET CHARACTERS WERE ABSTRACT FORMATIONS MADE FROM COMBINATIONS OF WEDGE SHAPED STROKES. SOME BELIEVE THE SHAPES WERE THE RESULT OF MARKING IN WET CLAY WITH A SPECIAL WRITING INSTRUMENT.*

the sign pictures then appeared horizontally instead of vertically.

A number of regional tribes and ethnic groups adopted Cuneiform in the mid-3rd millennium BC and most retained certain words that they incorporated into their (new) written and spoken language.

Cuneiform continued to be used, for their own dialects, by the

later Babylonians and Assyrians. Under Hammurabi of Babylon, in the 18th century BC, most of the extant records of Sumerian and Babylonian literature and scientific knowledge as well as the legal code of Hammurabi and thousands of economic and administrative documents and letters were written in cuneiform. Some of the finest cuneiform writing is found in the 9th to 7th-century BC Neo-Assyrian libraries such as the one at Ninevah.

During the 2nd millennium BC, Akkadian, written in cuneiform, became the official language of the Ancient Near East, and it was from this time onward that cuneiform script was adopted by the entire region as the means of writing their own languages.

Reading the old records of any dead language is always difficult, the Cuneiform presented a challenge which was not solved until the 1800s.

The decipherment of cuneiform, largely owing to the work of Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson and was one of the major advances in Near Eastern archaeology.

Rawlinson's translation of the Old Persian section of the trilingual rock inscription of Darius I at Behistun, Iran, led to the eventual decipherment of Babylonian cuneiform, thereby greatly extending knowledge of ancient Near Eastern and biblical history.