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Ancient Writing AH 44

Writing originally started with scratching letters and symbols into stone and advanced to writing with pen and ink on early.



The first written communication developed around Egypt, Crete and Mesopotamia, with the use of symbols to represent words and objects. In Mycene the people used symbols to represent common sounds and put them together to make words. This early alphabet was further developed by the Phoenicians and the Greeks, whose alphabet was made up of 24 letters. The Romans took inspiration from the Greek alphabet and used it to create Latin. Middle and Far East cultures were widely untouched by these languages and developed their own alphabets.

Two Cuneiform tablets



Cuneiform script is the earliest known writing system in the world. Cuneiform writing emerged in the Sumerian civilization of southern Iraq around the 34th century BC. Cuneiform was the most widespread and historically significant writing system in the Ancient Near East.

Cuneiform writing was an evolution of an earlier Mesopotamian accounting system that had been used for five thousand years before. Clay tokens had been used for some form of record-keeping in Mesopotamia since as early as 8,000 BC. Cuneiform documents were written on clay tablets, using a reed stylus. The impressions left by the stylus were wedge shaped, thus giving rise to the name cuneiform - "wedge shaped," from the Latin *cuneus*, meaning "wedge".



The original Sumerian script was adapted for the writing of many languages. Cuneiform writing was gradually replaced by the Aramaic alphabet during the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and by the second century AD, the script had become extinct.

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Top half of a Shabti figure



Small figures in the shape of mummies were often placed in the tombs of the dead. They were made from a variety of materials including stone, wood, pottery and even mud. This one is made of faience. Faience is a glazed non-clay ceramic material. It is composed mainly of crushed quartz or sand, with small amounts of lime and either natron or plant ash. This is coated with a soda-lime-silica glaze that is generally a bright blue-green colour due the presence of copper.

The earliest shabtis date from the Middle Kingdom (c. 2040-1750 BC). Their meaning probably changed over time, but from the New Kingdom onwards they are thought to have been designed to act as servants for the dead person. It was believed that everyone, even pharaohs, had to help with agricultural duties such as ploughing, sowing and reaping crops in the Afterlife. These figures, known as *shabtis* or *ushabtis,* meaning 'answerer' were thought to be able to undertake this work on behalf of the deceased. Some of them hold tools for farming in their hands such as hoes, picks or baskets. This one holds a hoe in one hand, a hook in the other, and a basket over the left shoulder.

Examples are also sometimes decorated with the name of the dead person, or have a magic spell carved or painted onto the body of the statue. The spell is usually from the Egyptian Book Of The Dead, a collection of spells to help the spirits of the dead pass through the Underworld. It commands the shabti figure to come to life and do the work that the owner asks of it. Sometimes overseer figures were also included to instruct the other shabtis. They can be told apart from the others as they often carry whips.

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Cast of inscription



This cast is part of an inscription from a tomb, originally in limestone. The head and shoulders of the dead man are shown. He is wearing the false beard of divinity and a collar of beads. In front of his face is the flower of either the lotus or papyrus plant.

"Hieroglyphs", from the Greek "sacred carving", was a formal writing system used by the ancient Egyptians that contained a combination of logographic and alphabetic elements.

As writing developed and became more widespread among the Egyptian people, simplified glyph forms developed, resulting in the hieratic (priestly) and demotic (popular) scripts. These variations were also more suited than hieroglyphs for use on papyrus. Hieroglyphic writing continued to exist alongside the other forms, especially in monumental and other formal writing.



Image of the Egyptian Book of the Dead scroll

The Rosetta Stone is an Ancient Egyptian artifact which was very important in advancing modern understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphic writing. The stone was carved with three translations of a single passage: two in Egyptian language scripts; Hieroglyphic and Demotic and one in classical Greek. By comparing the different texts, scholars and scientists were able to work out what the hieroglyphs meant. It was created in 196 BC and discovered in 1799 at Rosetta. The stone has been on public display at The British Museum since 1802.

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Four Roman coins



The Roman currency during most of the Roman Republic and the western half of the Roman Empire consisted of coins including the **aureus** (gold), the **denarius** (silver), the **sestertius** (bronze), the **dupondius** (bronze), and the **as** (copper). These were used from the middle of the third century BC until the middle of the third century A.D.

In general, the imperial government issued gold and silver coins while the Senate issued bronze coins marked by the legend ***"SC"***, short for *Senatus Consulto* "by decree of the Senate". You can see this on the back of 3 of the coins in this box.

The writing on the coins is in Latin a language used by the Romans, and introduced by them across the Roman Empire. The letters are all capitalised, and are the same as the letters we use in our alphabet today. Most of the letters are pronounced in the same way, with some exceptions. The writing is quite difficult to read, mainly because there are no spaces between the words and no punctuation. The Romans did not use either, although sometimes they used a dot to distinguish between words. Can you find the names of the individuals on the coins?

a.
This coin is Roman and dates from 225 AD. It is a denarius of Severus Alexander.

b.
This coin is Roman and dates from between 138 and 139 AD. It is a sestertius of Gordian III.



c.
This coin is Roman and dates from between 103 and 111 AD. It is a sestertius of Trajan.

d.
This coin is Roman and dates from after 164 AD. It is a sestertius of Lucilla.

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Two pieces of Samian ware pottery



Samian pottery was made in Gaul (the Roman name for France) and Germany. It is not glazed; the glossy red colour is caused by the iron oxide in the clay. It was exported to Britain from the mid-first to the mid-third century. Samian pots were used for a variety of purposes, including holding perfumes and skin-creams. They were also used to serve cooked food in the dining room, while coarser pots would have been used in the kitchen.

This piece (number 2009.590.1) is the base of a Samian cup. It dates from the Roman period and was discovered at Coptos in Egypt. The other piece (2009.591.1) is from a samian cup, but a slightly different shape. You can get a better idea of what shape the complete pot was by looking at it in profile.

Both fragments have writing on them the first piece is much more clearly written than the second one. Potters regularly stamped their pots. This may have been was a form of advertisement it may also have helped to distinguish the work of different craftsmen when they shared a kiln. These stamps also show us that potters had a level of literacy that allowed them to read and write, although if you look at both pieces you can see that the potter who made the first piece (2009.590.1) was better at forming letters than the other one was!

