

tpo_39_passage_1

Scholars agree that writing originated somewhere in the Middle East, probably Mesopotamia, around the fourth millennium B.C.E. It is from the great libraries and word-hoards of these ancient lands that the first texts emerged. They were written on damp clay tablets with a wedged (or V-shaped) stick; since the Latin word for wedge is *cuneus*, the texts are called cuneiform. The clay tablets usually were not fired; sun drying was probably reckoned enough to preserve the text for as long as it was being used. Fortunately, however, many tablets survived because they were accidentally fired when the buildings they were stored in burned. Cuneiform writing lasted for some 3,000 years, in a vast line of succession that ran through Sumer, Akkad, Assyria, Nineveh, and Babylon, and preserved for us fifteen languages in an area represented by modern-day Iraq, Syria, and western Iran. The oldest cuneiform texts recorded the transactions of tax collectors and merchants, the receipts and bills of sale of an urban society. They had to do with things like grain, goats, and real estate. Later, Babylonian scribes recorded the laws and kept other kinds of records. Knowledge conferred power. As a result, the scribes were assigned their own goddess, Nisaba, later replaced by the god Nabu of Borsippa, whose symbol is neither weapon nor dragon but something far more fearsome, the cuneiform stick. Cuneiform texts on science, astronomy, medicine, and mathematics abound, some offering astoundingly precise data. One tablet records the speed of the Moon over 248 days; another documents an early sighting of Halley's Comet, from September 22 to September 28, 164 B.C.E. More esoteric texts attempt to explain old Babylonian customs, such as the procedure for curing someone who is ill, which included rubbing tar and gypsum on the sick person's door and drawing a design at the foot of the person's bed. What is clear from the vast body of texts (some 20,000 tablets were found in King Ashurbanipal's library at Nineveh) is that scribes took pride in their writing and knowledge. The foremost cuneiform text, the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, deals with humankind's attempts to conquer time. In it, Gilgamesh, king and warrior, is crushed by the death of his best friend and so sets out on adventures that prefigure mythical heroes of ancient Greek legends such as Hercules. His goal is not just to survive his ordeals but to make sense of this life. Remarkably, versions of Gilgamesh span 1,500 years, between 2100 B.C.E. and 600 B.C.E., making the story the epic of an entire civilization. The ancient Egyptians invented a different way of writing and a new substance to write on—papyrus, a precursor of paper, made from a wetland plant. The Greeks had a special name for this writing: hieroglyphic, literally "sacred writing." This, they thought, was language fit for the gods, which explains why it was carved on walls of pyramids and other religious structures. Perhaps hieroglyphics are Egypt's great contribution to the history of writing: hieroglyphic writing, in use from 3100 B.C.E. until 394 C.E., resulted in the creation of texts that were fine art as well as communication. Egypt gave us the tradition of the scribe not just as educated person but as artist and calligrapher. Scholars have detected some 6,000 separate hieroglyphic characters in use over the history of Egyptian writing, but it appears that never more than a thousand were in use during any one period. It still seems a lot to recall, but what was lost in efficiency was more than made up for in the beauty and richness of the texts. Writing was meant to impress the eye with the vastness of creation itself. Each symbol or glyph—the flowering reed (pronounced like "i"), the owl ("m"), the quail chick ("w"), etcetera—was a tiny work of art. Manuscripts were compiled with an eye to the overall design. Egyptologists have noticed that the glyphs that constitute

individual words were sometimes shuffled to make the text more pleasing to the eye with little regard for sound or sense.

question 1

According to paragraph 1, the name of the earliest form of writing reflects the fact that this writing was

- A inscribed on damp materials
- B preserved by accidental firing
- C made with a wedge-shaped stick
- D kept in libraries and word-hoards

question 2

Paragraph 1 supports which of the following ideas about the method of preserving cuneiform texts by sun drying them?

- A It was regarded as unnecessary for texts that were actively being used.
- B It was discovered accidentally.
- C It was used for texts intended for libraries but not for other texts.
- D It did not provide enough protection for texts to survive into modern times.

question 3

Select the TWO answer choices that, according to paragraph 2, indicate why cuneiform writing was important in societies of the Middle East. To obtain credit you must select TWO answer choices.

- A It allowed people from fifteen different language groups to communicate with each other.
- B It was used to record different kinds of commercial transactions.
- C It was used to record laws.
- D It was used to record the established boundaries of the areas occupied by each society.

question 4

In paragraph 2, why does the author point out that Babylonian scribes were assigned their own goddess?

- A To explain why scribes in Babylonia were given the responsibility of writing laws
- B To indicate a consequence of the fact that scribes were powerful in Babylonian society
- C To explain why over time Babylonian scribes no longer recorded business transactions
- D To explain how Babylonian scribes came to be associated with symbols of warfare

question 5

The word "abound" in the passage is closest in meaning to

- A are important
- B are available
- C are numerous
- D are revealing

question 6

The word "astoundingly" in the passage is closest in meaning to

- A truly
- B incredibly
- C noticeably
- D reasonably

question 7

Why does the author mention a cuneiform text that documents "an early sighting of Halley's Comet, from September 22 to September 28, 164 B.C.E." ?

- A To explain how important Babylonian events were recorded
- B To support the idea that some cuneiform texts provide precise scientific information
- C To explain how particular Babylonian customs arose concerning sick persons
- D To identify a particularly valuable text from the library of King Ashurbanipal

question 8

Paragraph 5 supports all of the following statements about Egyptian hieroglyphics EXCEPT:

- A They were associated with buildings that had a religious function.
- B They were used in Egypt for many centuries.
- C They were believed to be a gift to humans from the gods.
- D They were sometimes written on material made from plants.

question 9

Which of the sentences below best expresses the essential information in the highlighted sentence in the passage? Incorrect choices change the meaning in important ways or leave out essential information.

- A Sometimes the appearance of texts was improved by giving more beautiful symbols to individual words even though the sound and sense of the changed words remained the same.
- B The symbols for individual words were sometimes moved around in a text, regardless of these words' meaning and sound, to make the text more beautiful.
- C The glyphs used as symbols for individual words in texts were sometimes chosen more for their beauty than for their connection to sound or sense.

D For various reasons, individual glyphs were sometimes shuffled to make a text sound more pleasing, to make its sense clearer, or to make its appearance more beautiful.

question 10

Directions: Select from the seven phrases below the phrases that correctly characterize cuneiform writing and the phrases that correctly characterize hieroglyphic writing. Drag each phrase you select into the appropriate column of the table. Two of the phrases will NOT be used. This question is worth 3 points.

- A. Limited to financial and business uses
- B. Emphasis on the beauty and overall design of the text
- C. Written on clay tablets with a stick
- D. Most characters redesigned 1,500 years after they were created
- E. Up to a thousand characters used during a given period
- F. Written on papyrus and sometimes carved into stone
- G. Used for fifteen languages over a wide area