Chapter 2: Mesopotamia: 2-2d The Evolution of Writing
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Printed By: Colin Morris-Moncada (006279659@coyote.csusb.edu)

2-2d The Evolution of Writing

Spoken language was one of the key achievements of early human beings, enabling an intensity and variety of communication that was previously unknown. We have no certain idea when modern forms of speech occurred, but linguists theorize that this was around 80,000 years ago. Not until sometime in the fourth millennium (4000–3000 B.C.E.), however, was oral language joined to a written form, and so remained permanently accessible.

Perhaps the most important and lasting of all the Sumerian accomplishments was the gradual invention of a system of writing, which evolved from their need to have good records. This was for the purpose of keeping their calendar and predicting seasonal changes, as well as for commercial and religious taxation, marital and inheritance contracts, and some other activities in which it was important to have a clear, mutually agreed-upon version of past events. Markings on various media (for example, clay, paper, wood, and stone) had been in use long, long before 3500 B.C.E. What did the Sumerians of that epoch do to justify the claim of having invented writing? Significantly, they moved beyond pictorial writing, or symbols derived from pictures, into a further phase of conveying meaning through abstract marks.

All writing derives originally from a simplified picture. This is called *pictography*, and it has been used by ancient societies worldwide. Pictography had several obvious disadvantages, though. For one thing, it could not convey the meaning of abstractions (that is, things that have no material, tangible existence). Nor could it communicate the tense of a verb, the degree of an adjective or adverb, or many other things that language has to handle well.

Sumerians (and later peoples) got around these difficulties by gradually expanding their pictorial writing to a much more sophisticated level so that it included special signs for abstractions, tenses, and so on—signs that had nothing to do with tangible objects. These are called *conventional signs* and may be invented for any meaning desired by their users. For example, if both of us agree that the sign *cc* stands for “the boy in the blue suit,” then that is what it means when we see it on a piece of paper, or a rock surface, or wherever. If we further agree that by adding the vertical stroke *!* we make a verb into a future tense, then it is future tense so far as we are concerned. Very slowly, the Sumerians expanded their pictographic vocabulary in this way, while simultaneously simplifying and standardizing their pictures so that they could be written more rapidly and recognized more easily by strangers.

A big breakthrough came sometime in the third millennium (3000–2001 B.C.E.), when a series of clever scribes began to use written signs to indicate the sounds of the spoken language. This was the beginning of a *phonetic written language*, in which the signs had a direct connection with the oral language. Although the Sumerians did not progress as far as an alphabet, they started down the path that would culminate in one about 2000 years later.

The basic format of the written language after about 3500 B.C.E. was a script written in wedge-shaped characters, the cuneiform, on clay tablets about the size of your hand. Tens of thousands of these tablets covered by cuneiform writings have been dug up in modern times. Most of them pertain to contracts between private parties or between a private party and officials, typically records of government and trade, as well as astronomical and astrological records, calendars, and ritual matters. But other tablets contain law codes, judgments, and some letters and poetry. Sumerian cuneiform remained the basic script of most Near and Middle Eastern languages until about 1000 B.C.E., when its use began to fade out.