Sumerian Cuneiform

History

Figure 1 Ancient Sumer compared to modern Iraq.

Cuneiform was one of the earliest writing systems, dating back to 3200 B.C.E.[1] It was also among the longest lived writing systems. The last known script dates from approximately 75 C.E.[2] Many early civilizations utilized a form of Cuneiform. Among those were the Akkadian, Babylonians, Assyrians, Elamites, Lullubi, Eblaites, Kassites, Hurrians, Hittites, Luwians, Urartians, and Sumerians (*Encyclopædia Iranica).* Most of these societies were part of the ancient Mesopotamian Empire.[i] The Mesopotamian Empire stretched from what is now known as the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf and into modern day Egypt, Turkey and Iran (Hays).

Sumer, also referred to as Sumeria and its people as Sumerians, occupied what is now part of modern day Iraq. Sumeria is considered one of the first civilized societies. Their populations lived in complex cities and produced food through organized agriculture. The Sumerians were some of the first people to domesticate animals such as sheep and cattle. Their populations lived in the fertile valleys of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. This was important to their writing system because the clay from the area supplied the medium on which they wrote their text. Their Cuneiform system was adapted from early pictographic systems[3] that morphed into phonic systems[4] and finally to a syllabic system[5] with a decipherable alphabet (Hays).

The early Cuneiform writing system was used to as an inventory system for trade, accounting of agricultural bounties and livestock tracking. Households, usually the noble class, would record purchase and sale of real estate, animals, and food goods. One notable advancement in their writing system came when numbers became differentiated from words. This small nuance allowed for more accurate accounting and was easier to denote the record. Instead of having to repeat the same symbol over and over for the number of items, a scribe could use one symbol for

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[1] Before the Common Era (Merriam-Webster).
[2] Common Era (Merriam-Webster).
[3] For example: an ancient or prehistoric drawing or painting on a rock wall (Merriam-Webster).
[4] Using a system of written symbols that represent speech sounds in a way that is very close to how they actually sound (Merriam-Webster).
[5] A set of written characters for a language, each character representing a syllable (thefreedictionary.com).

Figure 2 Early Sumerian tablet accounting for the purchase of land. From Baghdad, Iraq.

the word and one for the number of what was being counted. It alleviated burdensome and time consuming repetition (Penn Museum).

Any member of the Sumerian society who was fluent in reading or writing of Cuneiform, was in high demand and could make a good living as a scribe. For this reason, among others, Cuneiform was taught in a school-like setting to children of noble lineage. Usually the schools were in private houses. Much like today's penmanship lessons, teachers were strict with students so that the symbols imprinted were clear and precise, making accounting easy to read. Since Cuneiform was used in many Mesopotamian civilizations, communication and trade between them became easier (Penn Museum). Eventually, the cuneiform writing system allowed for recording of more than trade receipts and accounting. For example, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*[ii] was one of the first masterpieces of literature, recorded and preserved on cuneiform tablets (Metropolitan Museum of Art).

Cuneiform was eventually lost and replaced by other writing systems with the rise and fall of Empires.

Interesting fact: The word Cuneiform was introduced by Thomas Hyde,[iii] *and English Assyriologist from the late 1600s and early 1700s, who disputed the validity of Cuneiform as a legitimate writing system. He believed the wedge shaped symbols couldn't function as a writing system (Encyclopædia Britannica).*

It wasn't until the mid-1800s that a British Officer named Henry Rawlinson[iv] discovered carvings in a cliff, that Cuneiform was rediscovered and deciphered. Rawlinson's find included identical text in three languages, Persian, Babylonian and Elamite. This allowed for the inscription to be translated and for a greater understanding of the Mesopotamian, and therefore, Sumerian culture, especially their Cuneiform writing system (*Encyclopædia Britannica*).

Technical Dimensions

How Sumerian Cuneiform works:

Medium: *soft clay, later baked in a kiln or dried in the sun for preservation.*

Writing Instrument*: Reed stylus, sharpened to a point on one end and a wedge on the other.*

Soft clay, often mixed with straw, was formed into tablets and the reed stylus, or pen, was used to press the symbols, signs and letters into the clay. As long as the clay remained soft, the practice of writing Cuneiform could be "erased" by simply reshaping the clay into a fresh tablet.

If a script was required or desired to be preserved, the tablets were hardened and dried in the sun or in a heated kiln (Penn Museum).

Figure 3 Reproduction of reed stylus and wedge shaped letters it creates.

An interesting note about some of the preserved Sumerian Cuneiform tablets we have today:

When the Babylonians invaded Sumeria and burned their cities in an effort to destroy Sumerian civilizations, many of the clay tablets in the cities were hardened in the fires. So in a very real way, the intentional destruction actually unintentionally preserved the history of the Sumerian Cuneiform writing system (Penn Museum).

As mentioned before, the reed stylus was shaved, or sharpened, into two distinct shapes. One end would have a wedge shaped pattern and the other a fine point to make lines and circles.

In the early system, pictographs represented whole phrases or ideas. For example, the image of a fish or bird would represent the actual thing. Later as the societies advanced and their writing needs became more complex, the images became more abstract. One image would represent a set of sounds, a consonant-vowel (CV) sound such as "bi" or "ba." Vowel-consonant (VC) or consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) sounds could also be represented, sounds like "ak" or "dak." The final stage of transformation came when single syllables were represented by one character. This is much like what we are used to in the modern English alphabet system. Numbers were represented by circles pressed into the clay (*Encyclopædia Iranica).*

The system is usually read from top to bottom and around the back side of the tablet. The reader then returns to the front and moves to the right column adjacent to the one just finished, this rotation of tablet is repeated until all the information is read (Penn Museum).

The only form of punctuation that occurs is in the form of vertical lines denoting the separation of columns and horizontal lines within those columns indicating the completion of a thought, idea or account.

All the materials necessary for this writing system were readily available in the fertile river valleys in which the Sumerians lived. Clay, water (to soften the clay) and plentiful reeds to carve styli were all in abundance in river valleys of Sumer (Hays).

Current Status

Cuneiform managed to thrive for over 3000 years, in many civilizations and in many forms. However, Sumerian Cuneiform, or any Cuneiform writing system, is no longer in use today. As stated above the last known script was dated to around 75 C.E., nearly 2000 years ago. It is mainly studied by linguists as a way to understand writing systems throughout history and their impact on modern writing systems.

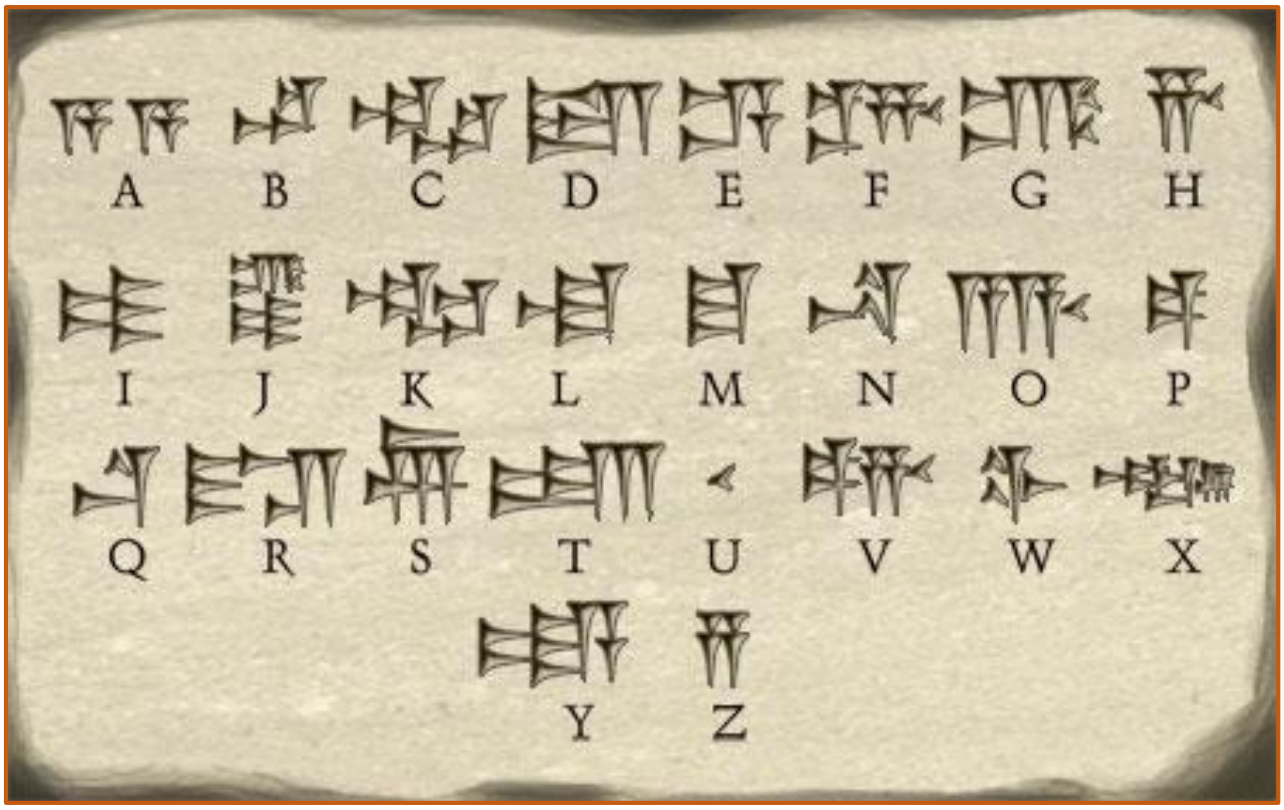

Figure 4 Sumerian Cuneiform alphabet.

For a fun cuneiform translator, visit http://www.paleoaliens.com/event/babylonian/.

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[i] See http://factsanddetails.com/world/cat56/sub363/item1533.html for more details on the Mesopotamian Empire.

[ii] See http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/gilg/hd_gilg.htm for more detail on *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

[iii] See http://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Hyde for more details on Thomas Hyde.

[iv] See http://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-Creswicke-Rawlinson for more details on Sir Henry Rawlinson.