

History of the Book

Vassar College Lifelong
Learning Institute

Spring 2025

Presenter: Nora J. Quinlan

Cell phones on silence please!



1560s print (MEin Hertz freüdt sich allzeyt so sehr) that shows a Landsknecht posing originally with a drinking glass. The image has a smartphone. The original image is digitized by Zentralbibliothek Zürich, PAS II 4/4, and can be accessed here: <https://www.e-zuzneb.ch/zuzneb/content/titleinfo/2725498>

Agenda

01 In the beginning

02 Prehistoric art

03 Mesopotamia

04 Egypt

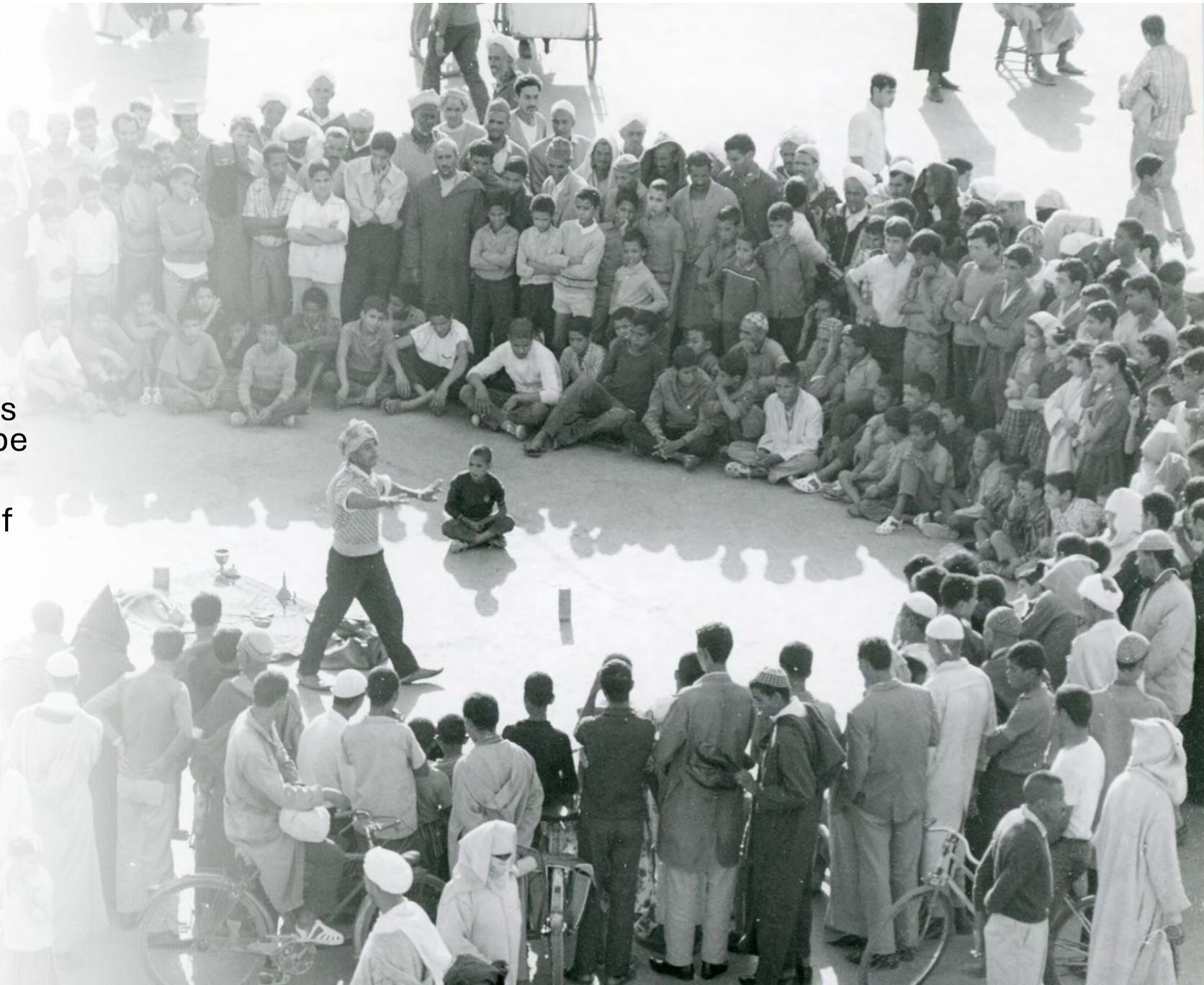
05 The Alphabet

In the beginning

A storyteller in Fez, 1960s

Human speech and hand gestures are used to tell a story – that will be passed on to a next generation.

A tradition going back hundreds of millennia.



Educational access to image provided by Europeana



Lascaux

[Lascaux cave](#)



Figure 5 Distribution of primary Palaeolithic cave-art locations in Eurasia. Peter Bull.

Paleolithic cave art has been located throughout the world from Europe to Korea, Indonesia and Australia.

More sites are being discovered every year. Cave art has been dated as old as 45,000 years BCE

Source:

[Cave art history | Resource | RSC Education.](#)

Early Graphical Communication?

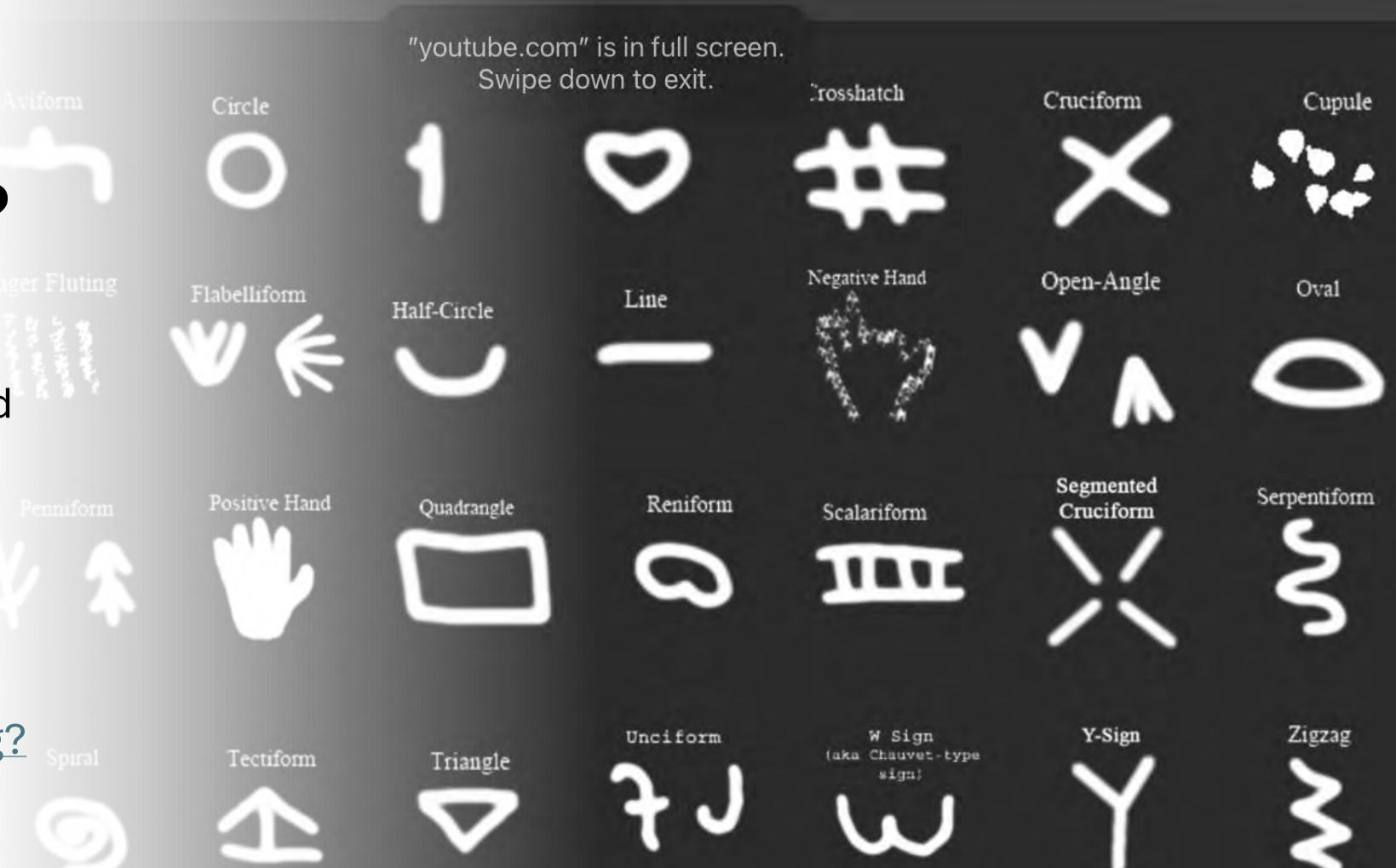
Why are these 32 symbols found in caves all over Europe ?

Genevieve von Petzinger

TED Talk

[https://youtu.be/hJnEQCMA5Sg?
si=KZrE1TSJ4y-9rDM3](https://youtu.be/hJnEQCMA5Sg?si=KZrE1TSJ4y-9rDM3)

The First Signs. NY: Atria Books, 2016.





Mesopotamia

Located in the Fertile Crescent between two rivers, the Tigris and Euphrates, is now present-day Iraq.

The Sumerians and then the Akkadian, dominated Mesopotamia from the beginning of recorded history (c. 3100 BCE) to the fall of Babylon in 539 BCE to the Persians.

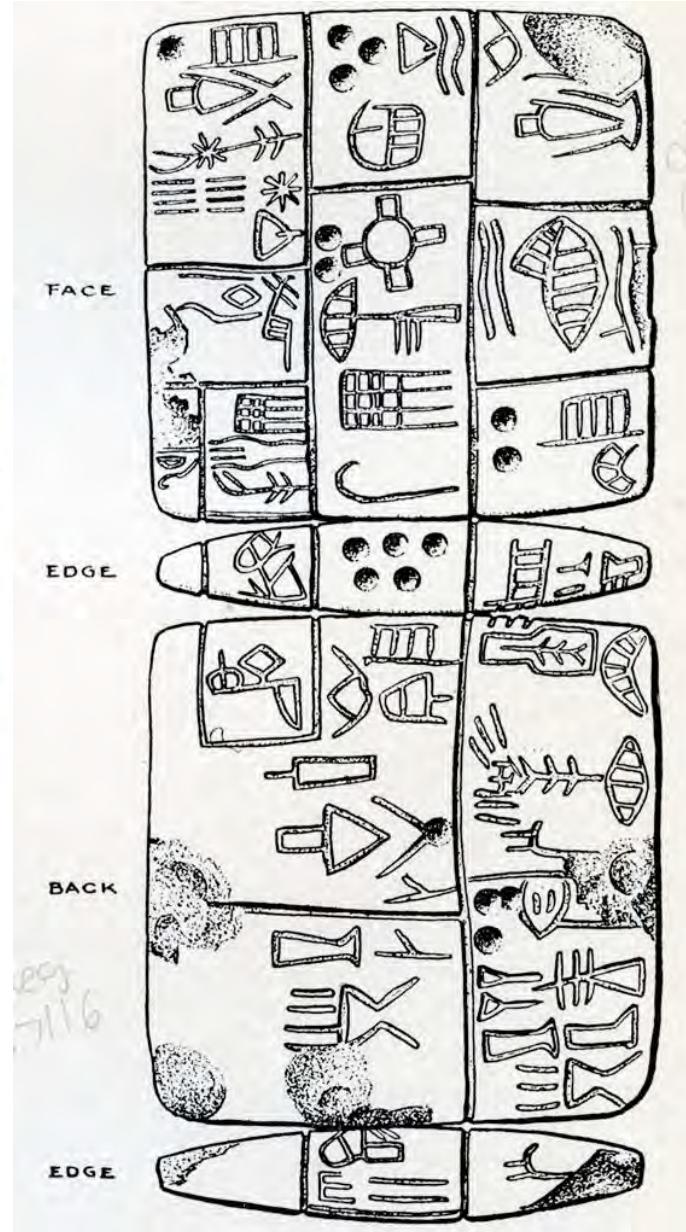
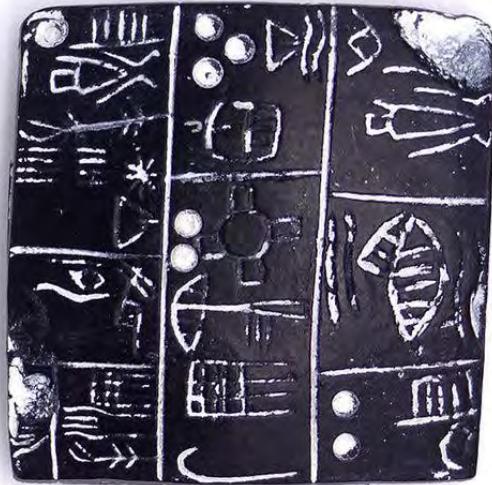
Evolution of Cuneiform over 2000 years

Gelb, I. J. A study of writing, rev. ed., Chicago:
U of Ch Press 1965

WORD-SYLLABIC SYSTEMS

BIRD	↓↑	↖↑	↑↙	↖↖
FISH	↔↔	↑↑	↑↑↑	↑↑↑
DONKEY	↑↑↑	↑↑↑	↑↑↑↑↑	↑↑↑↑↑
OX	↑↑	→→	→→→	→→→
SUN	↔↔	↔↔	↔↔	↔↔
GRAIN	↑↑↑	↑↑↑	↑↑↑↑↑	↑↑↑↑↑
ORCHARD	↑↑↑↑↑	↑↑↑↑↑	↑↑↑↑↑	↑↑↑↑↑
PLOUGH	→→→	↑↑↑	↑↑↑	↑↑↑
BOOMERANG	↔↔↔	↔↔↔	↔↔↔	↔↔↔
FOOT	↑↑↑	↑↑↑	↑↑↑↑↑	↑↑↑↑↑

FIG. 31.—PICTORIAL ORIGIN OF TEN CUNEIFORM SIGNS
Oriental Institute Photo No. 27875 (after A. Poebel)



Early Sumerian Tablet

c. 2900 -2700 BCE

Carved black stone

The First Section on the front:

describes the acquisition of a parcel of land.

The First Section on the back:

Thought to be a description of the buyer. It may be a person, or it may be a temple household for a deity.

Columns 2 and 3:

Describe how the land is divided into four fields.

The four holes count the four fields.

Pennsylvania University Museum. CBS16105

Beer Tablet, mid 13th century BCE



This tablet is a receipt, written in the Akkadian language of Mesopotamia, excavated at the site of Nippur (Iraq) at the turn of the 20th century.

Front:

40 and one half vessels of first quality beer
85 vessels of second quality beer
2 vessels of high quality beer
7 liters (1 sútu + 2 qu) of "beer bread"
This tablet is in (given to) the son of Kübu-
eresh

Reverse:

(In the) month of Ululu the 29th day
the 25° year (of an unnamed king)
(scribe:) Mr. Usat-Gula

Pennsylvania University Museum.
UM 29-13-889



Babylonian School Tablet c. 1000 BCE

This type of tablet is called a "bun" or "lentil" and was used for teaching students. Written in Sumerian.

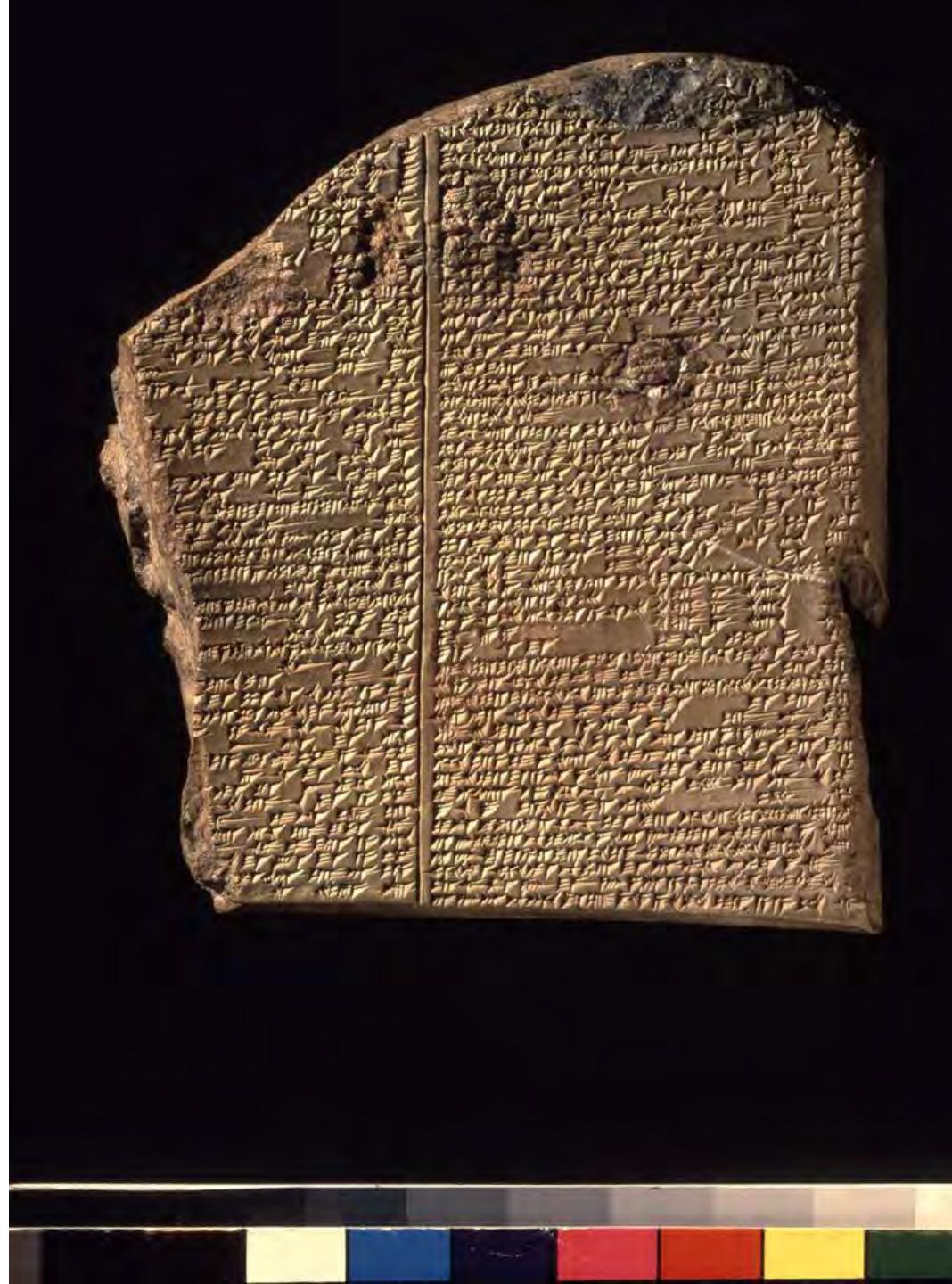
Top line on left:

gi-gur," which means "reed basket."

Top line on right:

"gi-gur-da," a type of large reed basket.

Look closely bottom right you can see the imprint of the student's palm.

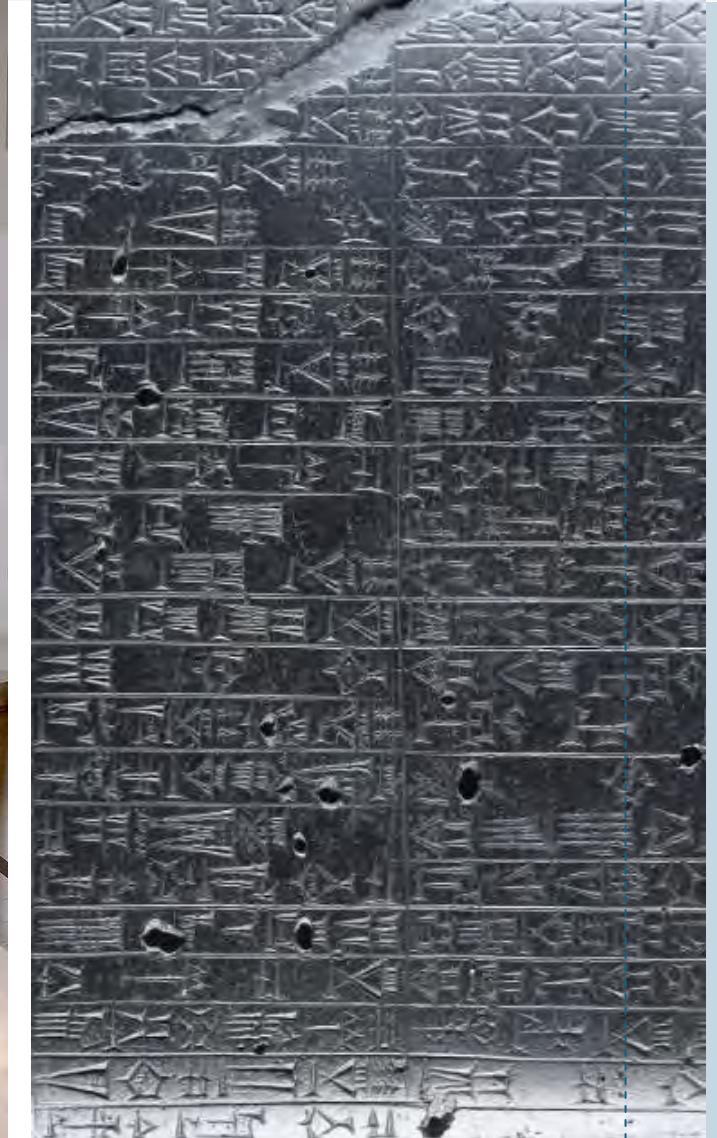


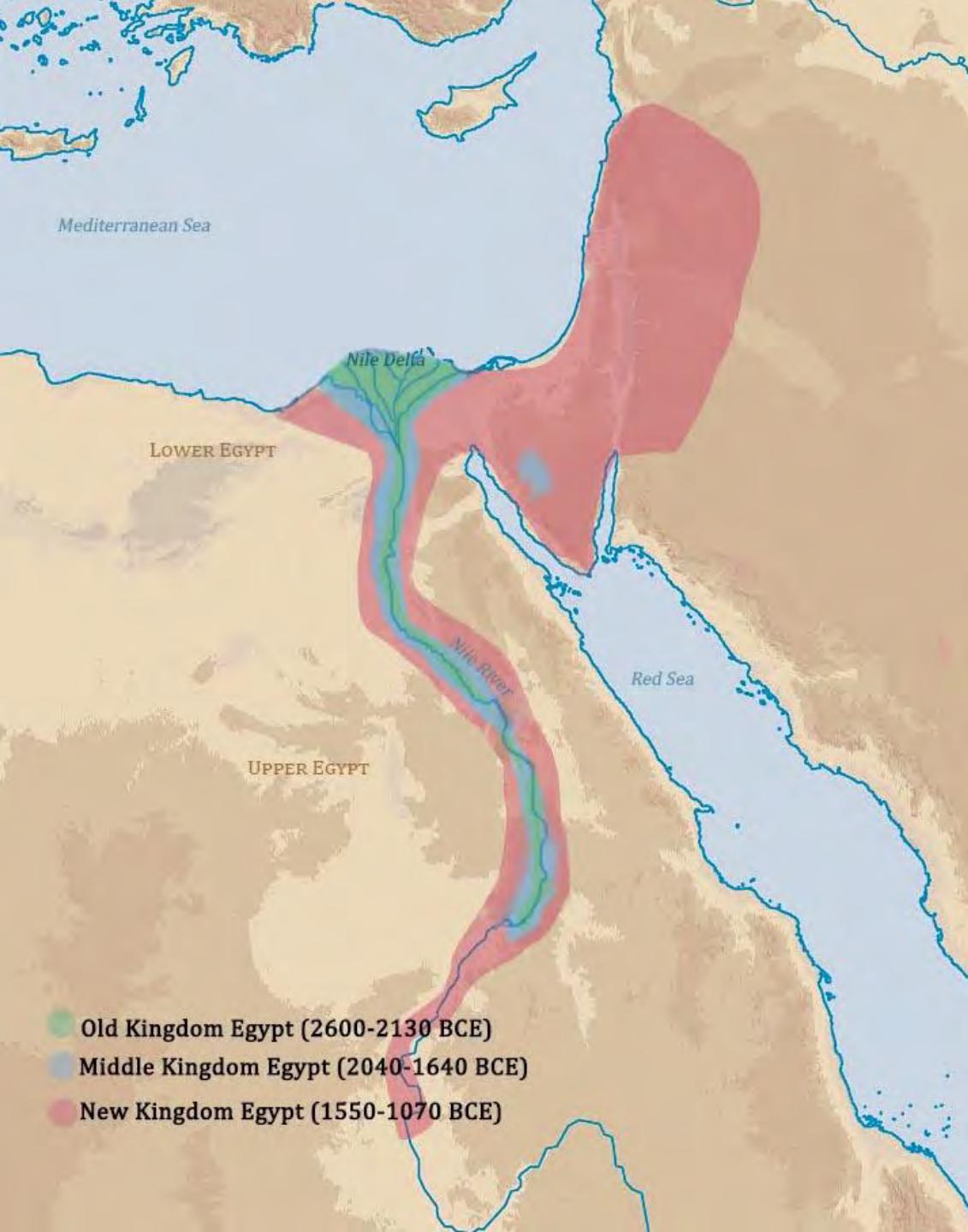
Epic of Gilgamesh, tablet 11, story of the Flood. 7thC BCE

© The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC-SA 4.0\) licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

The Code of Hammurabi

- A legal text composed c. 1755–1750 BCE
- Carved on stone stele.
- It is written in the Old Babylonian dialect of Akkadian, purportedly by Hammurabi, sixth king of the First Dynasty of Babylon.
- Musée du Louvre, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn





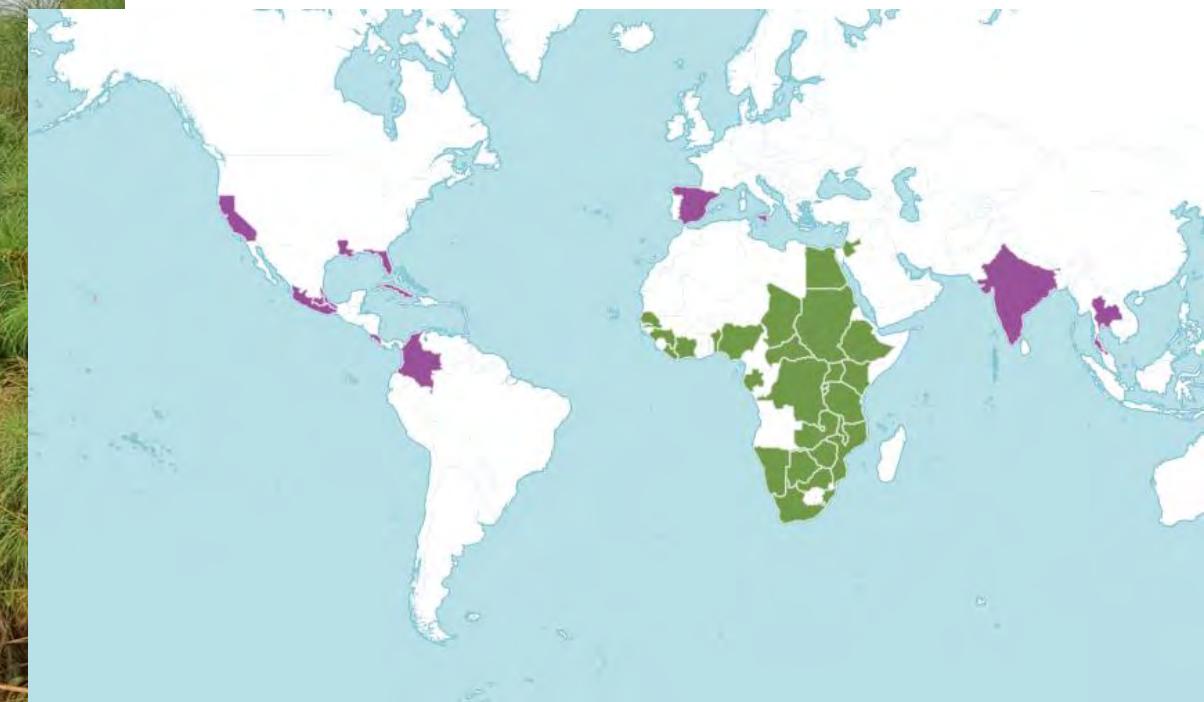
Ancient Egypt

The Three Kingdoms from 2600 -1070 BCE
Situated along the Nile Delta and River.

Source: Reed College



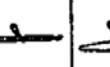
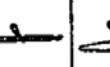
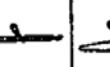
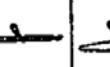
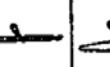
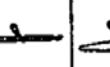
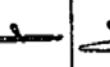
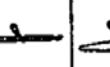
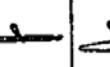
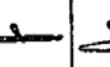
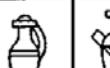
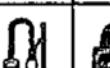
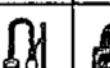
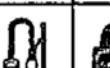
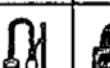
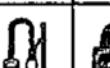
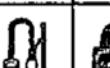
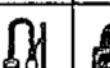
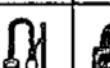
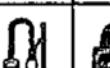
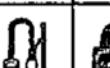
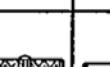
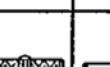
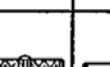
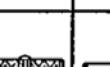
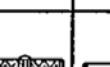
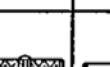
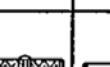
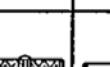
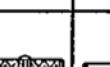
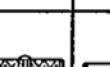
Papyrus



Images: Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew

Egyptian Writing

Note the three forms depending on user or material used

HIEROGLYPHIC					HIEROGLYPHIC BOOK-SCRIPT	HIERATIC			DEMOTIC
									
									
									
									
									
									
									
2900-2800 B.C.	2700-2600 B.C.	2000-1800 B.C.	c. 1500 B.C.	500-100 B.C.	c. 1500 B.C.	c. 1000 B.C.	c. 1300 B.C.	c. 200 B.C.	
—FORMAL DEVELOPMENT OF SOME—									



Haremhab

- Haremhab as a Scribe of the King
- New Kingdom
- ca. 1336–1323 BCE



Scribe's Palette
New Kingdom

ca. 1550–1295 BCE

MMA

THE
MET



Wooden Model of a
Granary with Scribes from
the Middle Kingdom
tomb of Meketre

ca. 1981–1975 BCE

Votive stela of Userhat
New Kingdom
1327–1295 BCE

An example of carved hieroglyphs



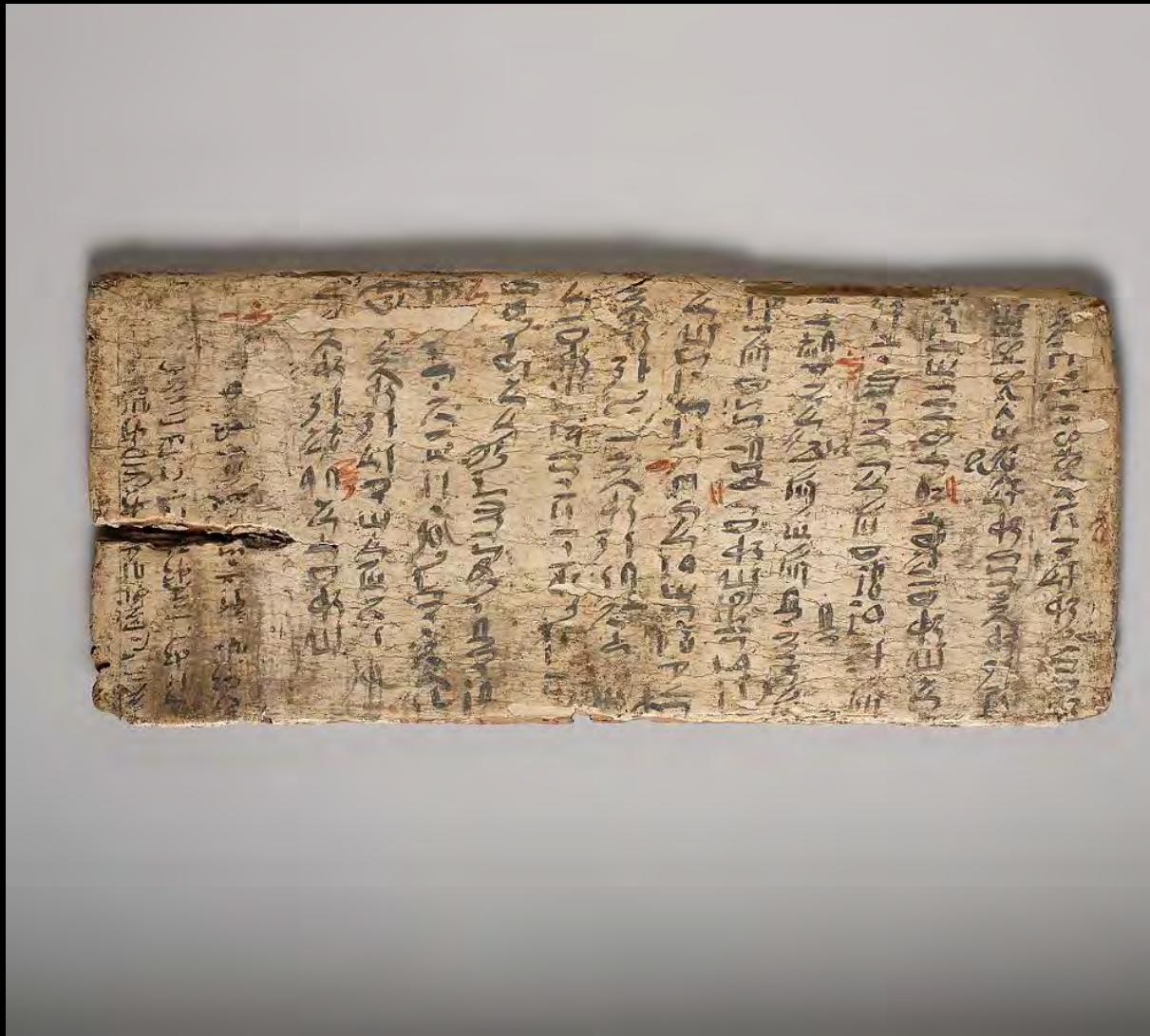


Book of the Dead for the Chantress of Amun Nauny

Third Intermediate Period
ca. 1050 BCE

Hieratic script and paintings on papyrus

A 17-foot-long scroll!



Writing board

Middle Kingdom

ca. 1981–1802 BCE

Wood painted with gesso would have been used for writing notes or school exercises. An example of the use of the demotic script.

The Rosetta Stone

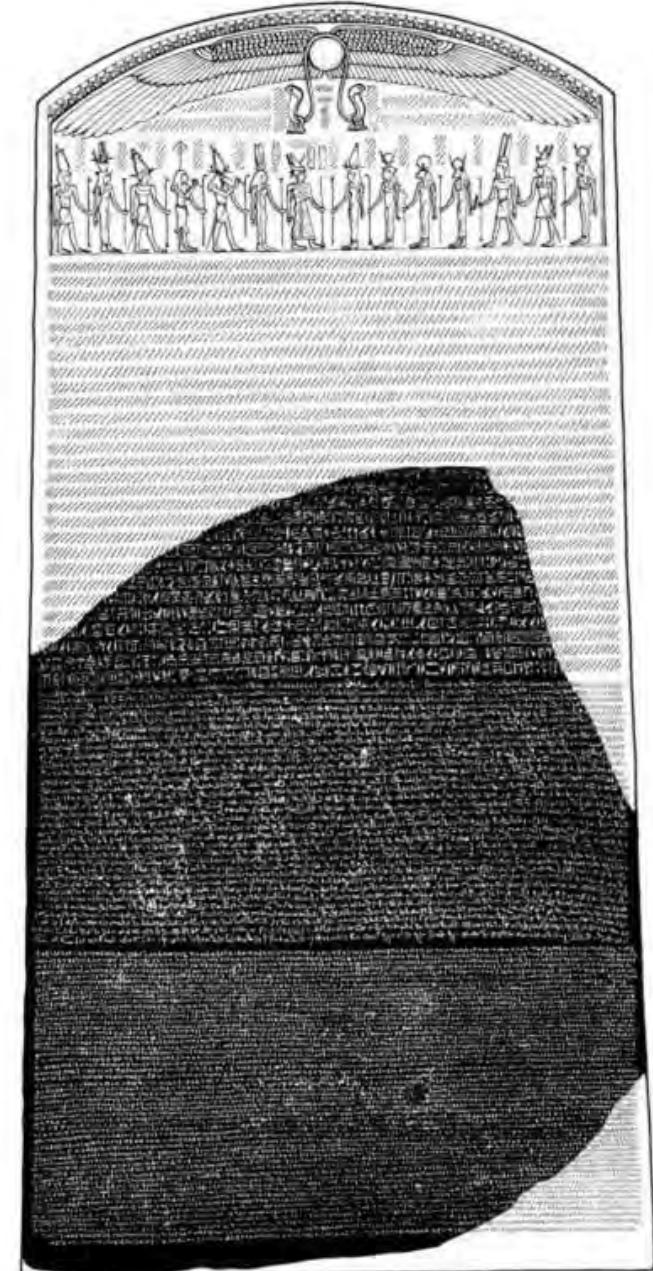
c. 204–181 BCE

By the end of the 4th Century AD, hieroglyphs had gone out of use and the knowledge of how to read and write them disappeared

A stele discovered in 1799 in Egypt showed a carved decree, written in three languages: hieroglyphs, Demotic, and Ancient Greek.

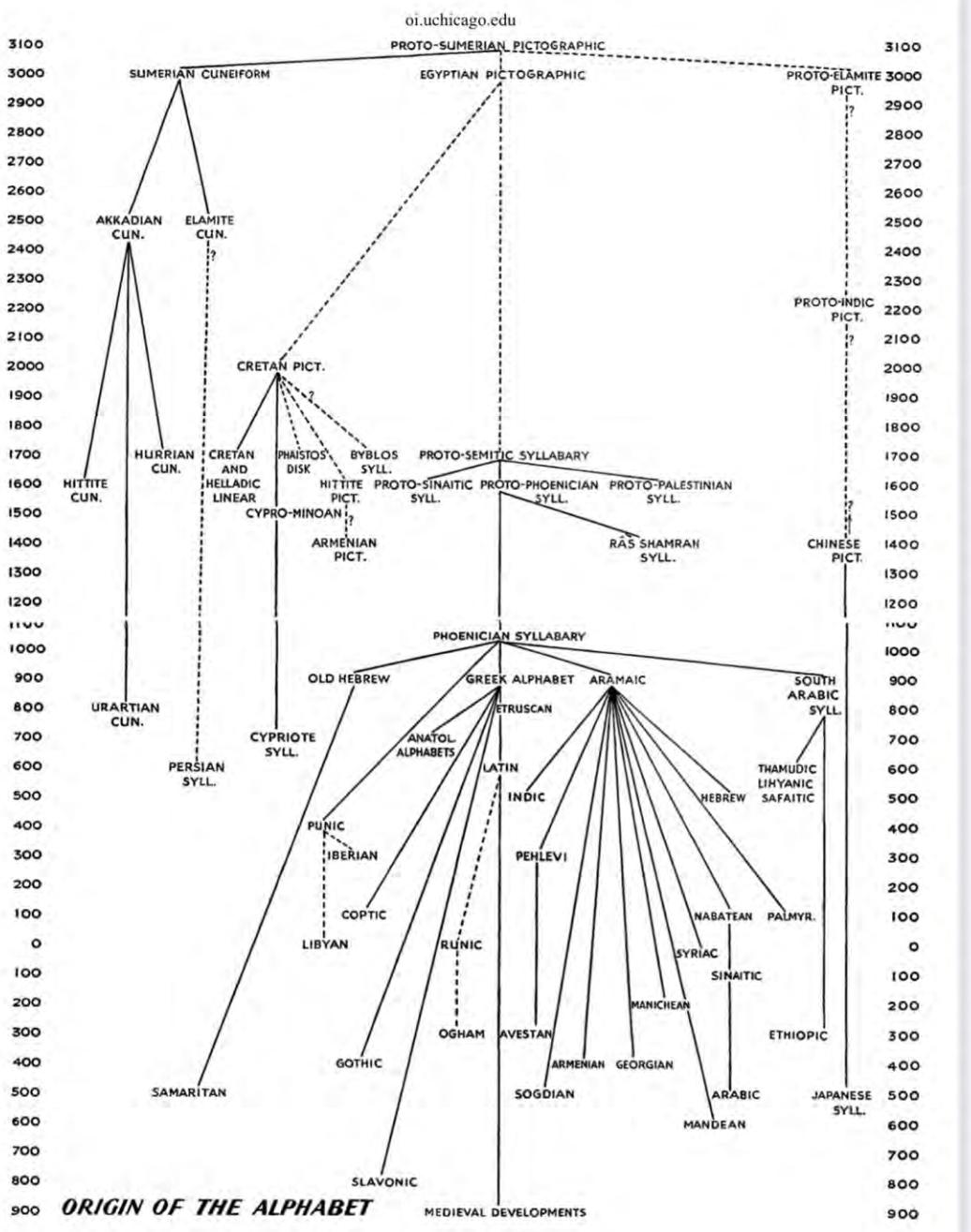
It was translated by the French scholar Jean-François Champollion in 1822. Using the ancient Greek text he was able to decipher the lost language of hieroglyphs.

c. The British Museum



Origin of the Alphabet

Gelb, I. J. A study of writing, rev. ed., Chicago: U of Ch Press 1965



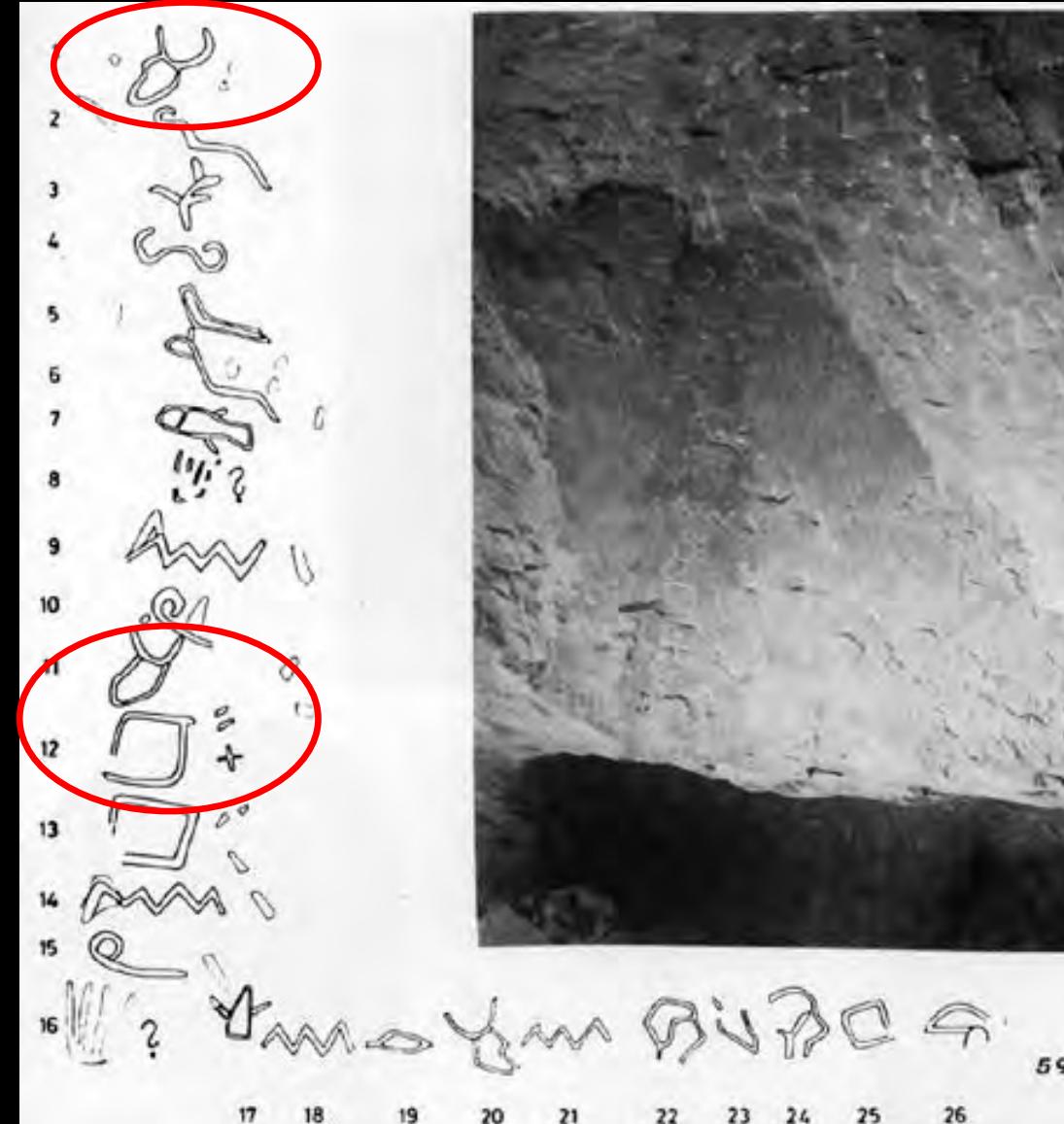
The Semitic Background of Our Alphabet

LATIN (ENGLISH)	ORIGINAL NAME	GRAPHIC PICTURE	EARLIEST KNOWN FORMS	SOUTH SEM (SABAEOAN)	MODERN ETHIOPIAN	N. WEST SEMITIC (EARLY HEBREW)	PHOENICIAN	MID-EARLY GREEK	ARAMAIC (MODERN HEBREW)	ARABIC
A	'alf	ox-head		𠁥	𠁥	𠁥	𠁥	𠁥	𠁥	ا
B	bēt	house		𠁧	𠁧	𠁧	𠁧	𠁧	𠁧	ب
C,G	gaml	throw-stick		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	ج
D	dāg	fish		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	د
E	hē	man calling		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	ه
U,V,W	waw	mace		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	و
Z	zēn	?		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	ز
H	hēt	fence		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	ه
I,J,Y	yad	hand w/closed fist		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	ي
K	kapp	palm		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	ك
L	lamd	ox-goad (whip)		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	ل
M	maym	water(waves)		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	م
N	nahāš	snake		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	ن
O	'ayin	eye		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	ع
F,P	pēh	mouth/corner		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	ف
Q	qu(p-)	?		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	ق
R	ra's	head		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	ر
S,X	tann	composite bow		𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	𠁩	س
T	taw	cross-marker		+	X	+	X	X	T	ت

Proto-Sinaitic Script or Early Alphabetic Script

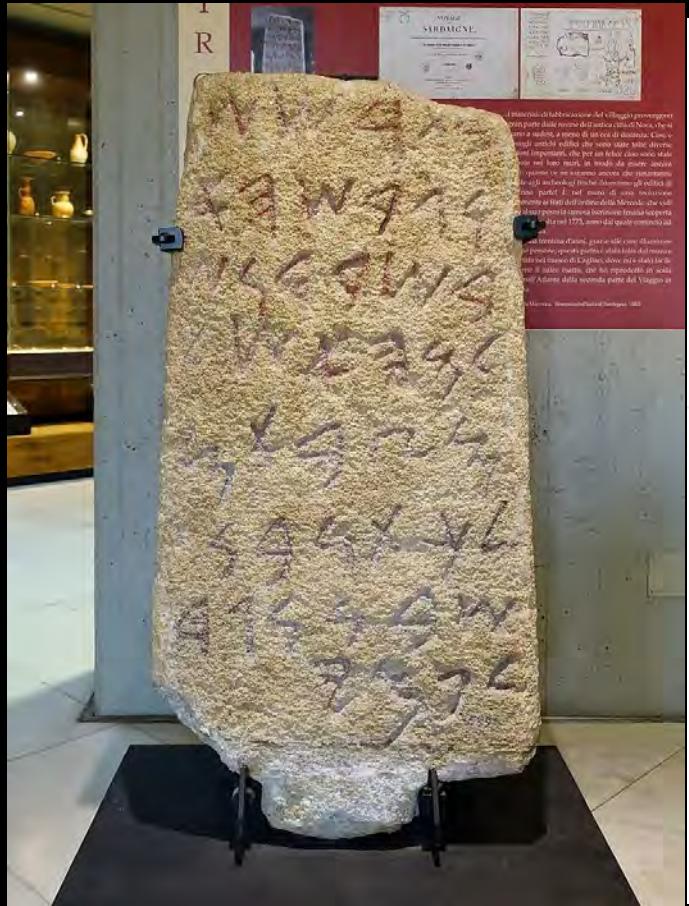
The earliest known alphabetic writing, using symbols representing phonetic sounds rather than complex ideograms, emerged in the Sinai Peninsula, c. 19th – 16th century BCE. It was based on Egyptian and Semitic languages.

This Alpha Beta was found carved on the wall of a turquoise mine and was believed to have been done by the miners.

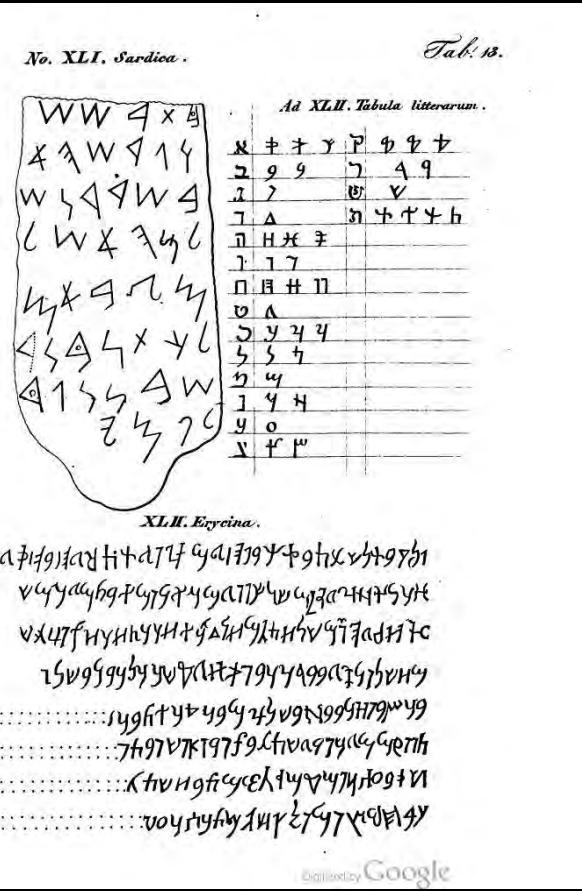


Sinai 357 (Beit-Arieh 1978, fig. 6 with modifications by B. Sass)

<https://net.lib.byu.edu/imaging/negev/Origins.html>



Nora Stone, Sardinia c. 9-8 Century BCE



Phoenician Alphabet

Around 1050 BCE, the Phoenicians developed an alphabet based on a series of consonants in 22 characters. It was simpler and more accessible than previous forms of writing.

Sailing from Tyre, now in Lebanon, the Phoenicians traded and settled all across the Mediterranean, using their alphabet to help with trade and communication.

Herodotus, *The Histories*. c. 430 BCE

A. D. Godley, Ed.

Book 5

58. These Phoenicians who came with Cadmus and of whom the Gephyraeans were a part brought with them to Hellas, among many other kinds of learning, the alphabet, which had been unknown before this, I think, to the Greeks. As time went on the sound and the form of the letters were changed.

[2] At this time the Greeks who were settled around them were for the most part Ionians, and after being taught the letters by the Phoenicians, they used them with a few changes of form. In so doing, they gave to these characters the name of Phoenician, as was quite fair seeing that the Phoenicians had brought them into Greece.

[3] The Ionians have also from ancient times called sheets of papyrus skins, since they formerly used the skins of sheep and goats due to the lack of papyrus. Even to this day there are many foreigners who write on such skins.

source: Perseus Digital Library

The Greek Alphabet

Around 800 BCE the Greeks took the Phoenician alphabet, removed some letters and introduced vowels, marking a significant advancement in written language.

Combining vowels and consonants they created a simple written language based on speech that was easy and quick to write.

Fragmentary marble inscription Greek, Attic ca. 425–424 BCE





Chinese Oracle Bone

c. 1600-1100 BCE

The oracle-bone inscriptions are the earliest surviving known form of writing in East Asia.

Rutgers College of Arts and Sciences

Questions and discussion