

The Development of Writing



People living in southern Mesopotamia developed one of the earliest writing systems in the world. The system was developed so that information could be recorded.

This writing system began with pictures or signs drawn on clay tablets. The signs changed over many years, and this is the story of what happened to just one of the signs.



Around 3100 B.C. people began to record amounts of different crops. Barley was one of the most important crops in southern Mesopotamia and when it was first drawn it looked like this.



Scribes drew the sign on soft clay tablets using a pointed tool, probably made out of a [reed](#) (A plant with a straight, tall stalk that grows in or near water).

For hundreds of years, the signs drawn on clay tablets hardly changed.

Farmers brought their barley to the temple stores. A record was kept of how much barley was received. When some of the barley was given to temple workers this was also recorded on a tablet.



The barley sign usually had a number next to it to show how much barley was being given in to the temple or taken away.

← This tablet records a [quantity](#) of barley. It was written in about 2900 B.C.

Mesopotamians measured [capacity](#) using containers.

One of the most common container sizes was called a 'gur'. One 'gur' is about the same capacity as about 300 liters.

The grain on this tablet was measured using 'gurs'. The scribe used a special numbering system to represent them.

1 gur is represented by this sign



10 gur is represented by this sign



The barley sign changed shape when the scribes used a writing tool with a squared-off end instead of a point.

The end of this tool was used to press wedge shapes like these into clay tablets.



It is at this point that the signs became what we call [cuneiform](#).

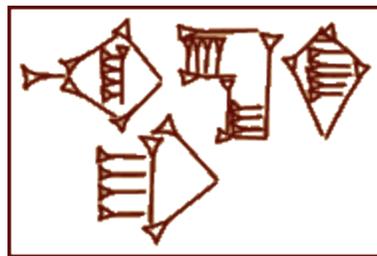
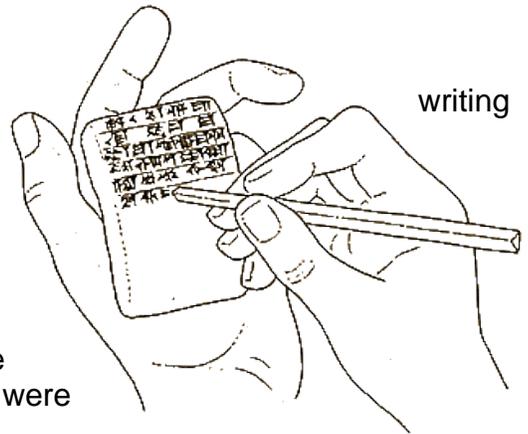
The barley sign had to be written using several wedges.

Writing tool- Each wedge was made by pressing the tool into the clay at an angle.

Although the signs had changed over the centuries there were more changes to come. Nobody can explain why the changes happened.

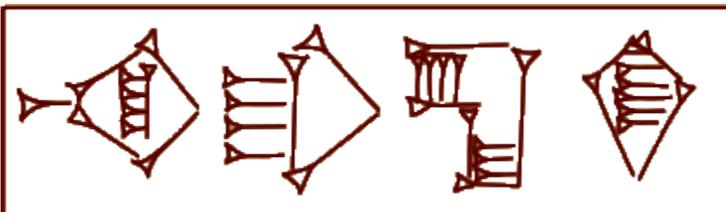
The most ancient tablets have signs drawn in boxes. Later, the signs were written in rows, arranged in the order in which they were read.

When signs were written in boxes they were not arranged in any order.

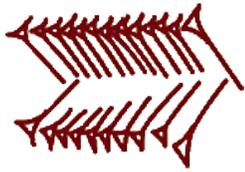
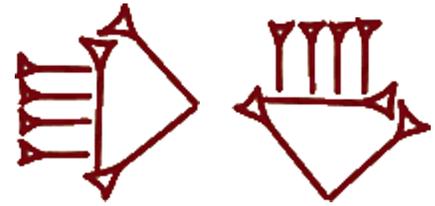


← On this tablet the signs for the city of Lagash appear together inside a box.

On this tablet the same signs appear in a row and are read from left to right. →



Another change was that the tablets were written so that all of the signs appeared to be lying on their side. Cuneiform signs were first written and read in columns. Later, they were written and read in rows. This meant that the signs are now [rotated](#) by 90 degrees.



←The barley sign looked like this

Not only the shape, but also the use of the sign had been changing. The barley sign could now be used in two ways.

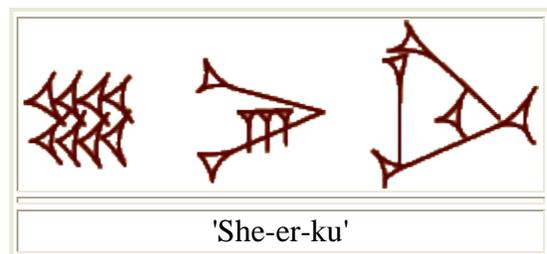
It could represent barley, as on this tablet, which tells us that Urra-ilum was given barley.



It could also be used to represent a sound. The Sumerian word for barley was 'she'. So the barley sign was used to represent the sound 'she' in a word.

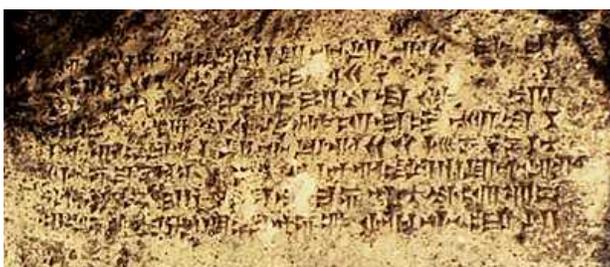


←For example, this tablet tells us about [fig](#) cakes given out from the temple. The Sumerian word for fig cake is 'she-er-ku'.



Cuneiform writing was used to record a variety of information such as temple activities, business and trade.

Cuneiform was also used to write stories, myths, and personal letters. The cuneiform script was used to write different languages. In Mesopotamia it was used to write both [Sumerian](#) and [Akkadian](#). It was also used to write other



languages like [Elamite](#), [Hittite](#) and, as carved here in stone, [Urartian](#).

Cuneiform script was used by other peoples because they needed to be able to record information but they did not have their own systems for writing down their languages.

You can write any language using cuneiform.

For example, let's use the word for sheep:

Sumerian	Akkadian	English
udu	seni	sheep
		
udu	si - e - ni	she - ep

The barley sign was used for over three thousand years. The way that it looked and the way that it was used changed in many ways.

One of the last ever appearances of the barley sign is on this tablet from [A.D. 61](#).



The sign looked like this:



Remember that the barley sign is only one of many.

Here are some of the other signs, and how they changed over three thousand years.

	c. 3100	c. 2800	c. 2400	c. 600
barley				
head				
bird				
ox				
tree				
palm				