

Who Had the Write Idea?

CUNEIFORM

Many scholars believe that the earliest humans to have purposely left written records were the Sumerians in the Tigris-Euphrates River Valley in present-day Iraq. Their knowledge, recorded in cuneiform writing on clay tablets, was written mainly in the form of lists. As of today, hundreds of thousands of clay tablets of varying sizes have been unearthed, dating from about 3200 BC to 100 AD. Modern researchers have been studying these Sumerian tablets in efforts to learn the meaning of the 600 or so common cuneiform signs. Though many of the tablets have been translated, there are perhaps 100,000 that have yet to be deciphered and probably even more that have yet to be uncovered.

Cuneiform, which was adopted as the writing system of a number of civilizations in the Fertile Crescent region, is a series of wedge-shaped signs arranged in crosses and slashes to form words. Scribes, the official writers of ancient times, pressed squared-off reeds into wet clay tablets to form the symbols. Scribes were usually trained from childhood to learn and use the many signs. Since tablets could take as long as a month to dry, many were baked, which has served to preserve them into modern times.

Most of the writings that have been translated are records of taxes and business deals, but there is also information about religion, science, medicine, and ancient legends. The most famous of the tablets is about the hero Gilgamesh, an epic of an ancient king.

HARAPPAN WRITING

What may be the first known examples of writing were discovered at an archaeological dig in Pakistan in 1999. What researchers describe as “plant-like” markings were on fragments of pottery dating back 5,500 years. The symbols, which were etched onto clay jars before firing, could have been used to label the contents of the jars. Other experts suggest that they could be the names of gods to whom the jars’ contents were offered as gifts.

The pottery was found at a site called Harappa in the Indus River Valley where a great civilization is known to have flourished 4,500 years ago. Though it is clear that the Harappan or Indus Civilization as it is sometimes called was advanced for its time, most of what is known is from the interpretation of artifacts that have been uncovered. Many of these artifacts are covered with symbols, most of which are yet to be interpreted. Unlike other ancient languages, the Harappan language did not become the basis of any future languages. It merely died out around 1900 BC, leaving behind many unanswered questions about the language and the ancient people who spoke and wrote it.

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☞ ★ CHINESE CHARACTERS ☜

Symbols carved into tortoise shells, found in China in 2003, may prove to be the earliest known writing. The shells, which were discovered in western China among human remains in twenty-four graves, date from between 6600 BC and 6200 BC. These markings would predate the earliest-known Sumerian writing by over 2,000 years.

The lead researcher involved in the archaeological excavations believes the signs are meaningful and “have a correspondence with ancient Chinese writing.” Eleven separate symbols were identified and some do in fact closely resemble Chinese characters used from 1700 BC to 1100 BC. Symbols for “eye” and “window” as well as the signs for 8 and 20 look very much like characters used in China 5,000 years later.

The link between the symbols is even more impressive because similar signs have been found along the Yellow River dating from times between the two. Still there is no way of knowing if the markings had the same meanings. There could be connections among the similar signs, but more research is needed to be certain.

☞ ★ HIEROGLYPHICS ☜

A 1998 discovery of hieroglyphics, the writing of the ancient Egyptians, in southern Egypt suggests that the earliest writing may have been in that ancient civilization. The hieroglyphics record linen and oil deliveries made over 5,000 years ago, which could possibly predate Sumerian cuneiform from 3000 BC. It is possible that both civilizations could have developed writing at about the same time, or one or the other could have learned of the concept through trade.

Archaeological experts consider the find extremely important. “This would be one of the greatest discoveries in the history of writing and ancient Egyptian culture,” said one Egyptology professor.

The writings found, like many later hieroglyphics, are line drawings of animals, plants, and mountains. Most came from the tomb of a king called Scorpion in a burial site 250 miles south of the Egyptian capital city of Cairo. About 300 pieces of writing on clay tablets about the size of postage stamps were found. Records of linen and oil delivered to King Scorpion I as taxes were also found on clay jars and vases in the tomb.

The writings show that Egyptian society at that time was far more developed than previously believed. The writings, aside from the fact that they exist at all, prove that the Egyptians of that time already had a strong economy and a system of tax collection.

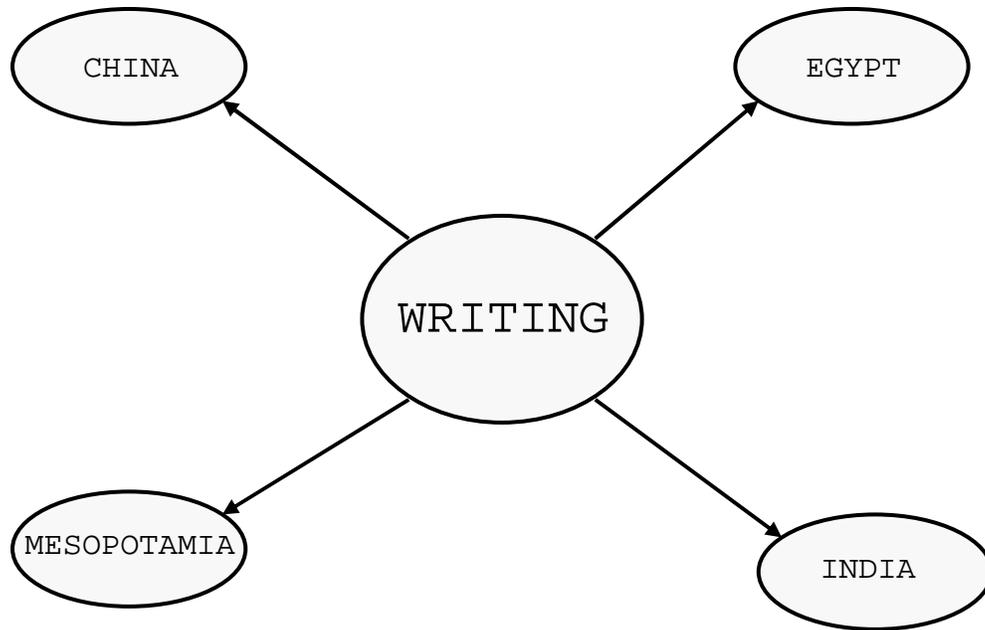


MAKING HISTORY



DIRECTIONS: Complete the web about ancient forms of writing with facts supporting each civilization as being the first to use written language.

Each person in your group needs to write down 5 facts around your civilization's bubble, and then share your facts with the rest of your group.



THINK: Which civilization do you think should be credited (at least for now) with developing writing? Explain. _____
