

## The Origins of Writing in Mesopotamia

Mesopotamian civilization arose in the [alluvial lowlands of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers](#) during the so-called Uruk period, roughly dating 4000–3100 B.C. The roots of this process are poorly understood, but the very fertile soil allowed farming societies to feed a growing population and multiple branches of the rivers gave them cheap transportation. It was against this background that the world's first cities emerged during the [Late Uruk period](#) (ca. 3500–3100 B.C.). Administrators within the cities, perhaps in large temple institutions, developed new ways of recording information. Representations of objects issued as rations, or stored for future use, were drawn on pieces of clay as memory aids: these pictographs were made by drawing a sharp stick or reed across the clay. Circular or crescent-shaped impressions alongside the pictographs represented numerical symbols. At the same time, other forms of recording were being used, including small tokens of clay in geometric shapes that represented numbers or quantities, some of which were enclosed within balls of clay. The surface of the clay balls was often impressed with a cylinder seal. Cylinder seals were linked to the innovation of recording on clay. Invented around 3400 B.C. in southern Mesopotamia or southwestern Iran, the surface of cylinder seals, generally made of stone, was carved with a design, so that when rolled on clay the cylinder would leave a continuous impression of the design, reversed and in relief. These seals were used as administrative tools, as jewelry, and as magical amulets until around 300 B.C.

Over time, the pictographs drawn on clay tablets became more abstract as the end of the reed was simply pressed at an angle a number of times into the clay to form the design. The signs were thus made up of wedgelike lines, or cuneiform (the Latin for "wedge" is *cuneus*). Writing, the recording of a spoken language, emerged from the earlier recording systems around 3000 B.C. The first written language in Mesopotamia is called Sumerian. Most of the early cuneiform tablets come from the site of [Uruk](#), in southern Mesopotamia, and it may have been here that this form of writing was invented.