



Sandstone sphinx found in Serabit el-Khadim in Sinai, with Proto-Sinaitic signs on the left base, some of which resemble Egyptian hieroglyphs (inscribed on the sphinx's right shoulder and base – not shown), 1800–1500 BC. The Proto-Sinaitic signs are thought to be part of the world's first alphabet, inspired by Egyptian hieroglyphs.

When and how did people first begin to write down ideas?

**Andrew Robinson** investigates

# The origins of writing

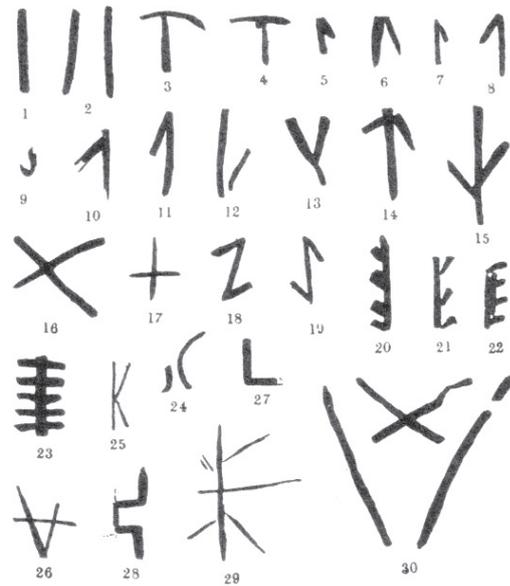
Writing is generally agreed to be among the greatest inventions in human history, perhaps the greatest invention, since it made history possible – as well as today's digital world. When H. G. Wells published *A Short History of the World* in 1922 he concisely expressed writing's significance to civilisation as follows: 'The command of the priest or king and his seal could go far beyond his sight and voice and could survive his death', citing the artistically carved sealstones of early Mesopotamia impressed in clay. As if to confirm the truth of this observation, in November 1922, just after Wells's book was published, the tomb of an unknown pharaoh who ruled more than three millennia ago was discovered in Egypt's Valley of the Kings. The pharaoh's name was immediately identified as Tutankhamun

from its frequent appearance in exquisite hieroglyphic inscriptions on objects in the tomb.

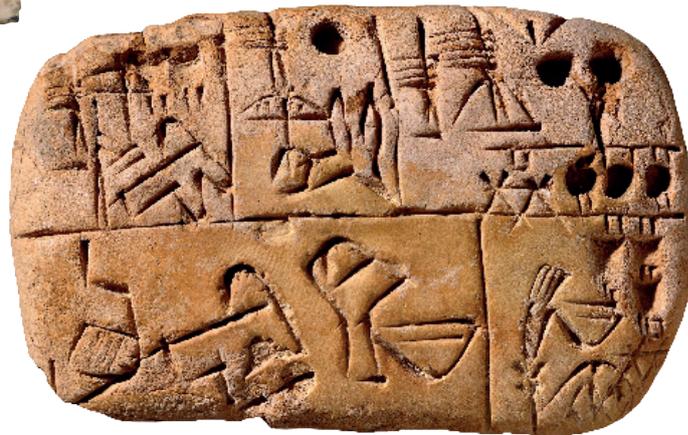
So where, when and how did writing come into existence? Wells hazarded the following explanation, again perceptive, if inevitably far more speculative: 'At first writing was merely an abbreviated method of pictorial record. Even before Neolithic times men were beginning to write.' Thus, in certain Palaeolithic cave paintings of Europe, the artists created full human figures but also abbreviated human figures with just a vertical mark and one or two transverse strokes. 'From this to a conventional condensed picture writing was an easy transition', Wells claimed, which occurred in both ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, in the cuneiform and hieroglyphic scripts, the first of which soon abandoned its

pictorial quality, whereas the second frequently retained it. Furthermore, in both of these neighbouring cultures, the representation of ideas, words and syllables that could not be directly pictured was made possible through the use of rebuses (Latin for 'by things'). For example, according to Wells the two syllables (so to speak) of the familiar Scottish name 'Campbell' might be represented in rebus writing by a picture of a camp with tents beside a picture of a bell. These two developments then led to the alphabet: 'All the true alphabets of the later world derived from a mixture of the Sumerian cuneiform and the Egyptian hieroglyphic (priest writing). Later in China there was to develop a conventionalised picture writing, but in China it never got to the alphabetical stage.'

The earliest Chinese characters inscribed on a Shang Dynasty oracle bone, c.1200 BC.



Neolithic Chinese pottery marks from the Banpo culture of the Yellow River valley, 5000–4000 BC.



Late Uruk proto-cuneiform clay tablet from Mesopotamia, 3300–3100 BC, with a human head and a triangular object representing bread in front of it, and three different types of numerical symbols.

A century after Wells's suggestive outline, how much of it is still accepted? And how much further advanced is our understanding of the origin of writing?

The answer is, broadly speaking, most of it. Writing began with pictures, then came pictography, then rebuses, then from c.3300 BC Sumerian cuneiform and soon afterwards Egyptian hieroglyphs. Finally, in the mid-second millennium in Palestine, came the first 'Proto-Canaanite' alphabet, influenced by the hieroglyphic signs. These stages are still widely seen by modern scholars as being essential to the development of writing, as it evolved from proto-writing, capable of limited communication like the earliest 'proto-cuneiform' tablets and also modern airport symbols, to full writing, that is, 'a system of graphic symbols that can be used to convey any

and all thought' – to quote an influential definition by Sinologist John DeFrancis in his book *Visible Speech: The Diverse Oneness of Writing Systems*.

However, Wells's notion of the monogenesis of writing in Mesopotamia (the 'cradle of civilisation') closely followed by Egypt, which was favoured by most scholars until the later 20th century, has been progressively abandoned. 'Origin' has tended towards 'origins'. Generally speaking, the archaeological discoveries of the past century – and the decipherments of ancient scripts such as Linear B of Crete/Greece and the Mayan glyphs of Mesoamerica – have complicated, rather than simplified, our understanding of early writing. Let us look at just three scripts: in China, South Asia and Rapa Nui (Easter Island).

China's Neolithic pottery marks dating from 5000–4000 BC – notably those from the Banpo culture of the Yellow River valley found in 1953 – have stimulated speculation about their connection with today's Chinese characters. The characters' earliest clearly recognisable versions occur on the so-called 'oracle bones' of the Shang culture dating from c.1200 BC, accidentally discovered by Chinese scholars in Beijing in 1899. They record royal divinations in sophisticated detail. Certain Neolithic marks resemble Shang characters, but the marks generally occur in isolation, not in sequence like the characters, and the apparent resemblances may be simply coincidental, rather than definitive. Moreover, the gap in time between the Neolithic marks and the Shang



Classic Mayan carved limestone lintel from Mexico showing a bloodletting ritual performed by the king of Yaxchilan and his wife in 709 AD, with glyphs indicating the event and the date, produced in 723–6.



Indus sealstone from Harappa with a 'unicorn' and undeciphered inscription, 2500–1900 BC.

culture – more than three millennia – seems implausibly long for the developmental stages of a sophisticated writing system: it is the same time span in which cuneiform and hieroglyphs both originated and operated as mature writing systems. ‘At present, the most that can be said for Neolithic origins is that certain habits of drawing, patterning and combining elements in Neolithic pottery marks might have endured for many centuries before they provided some sort of basis for the first invention of writing signs’, wrote former British Museum curator Oliver Moore in his BM guide, *Reading the Past: Chinese*.

Current scholars therefore hold differing opinions about the origin of Shang writing and Chinese characters. Some favour a gradual development of full writing from 5000 BC – so far undetected by archaeologists – from the proto-writing of the Neolithic marks, viewing Chinese writing as wholly indigenous. But most continue to support a much later emergence of writing in the Shang culture c.1200 BC, without being able to account for how this occurred. Might such apparently rapid emergence be explained by the import of the basic idea of writing from Mesopotamia via some forerunner of the Silk Roads that operated between Europe and China from the end of the 1st millennium BC until modern times? Conceivably so – yet there is no clear evidence for such a long-distance link.

In South Asia, an entirely unsuspected civilisation in the Indus River valley (modern Pakistan and northwest India) dating from about 2500–1900 BC, was discovered by British and Indian archaeologists in the early 1920s. It used an exquisite script inscribed mainly on steatite sealstones, some of which are displayed in the British Museum. Unfortunately, the Indus signs have resisted an agreed decipherment for almost a century, notwithstanding dozens of highly imaginative proposals. They – along with enigmatic emblems of objects, yogic figures and animals, including ‘unicorns’, inscribed next to many of the signs – resemble those of no other contemporary ancient script. Probably Indus sealstones and signs were markers of personal

identification like the clay cylinder seals of Mesopotamia. A stone boss on the back of sealstones with a hole drilled in it suggests that they were carried on strings around the neck of the owner.

Intriguingly, a small number of Indus seals (20 in all) have been discovered at excavations in Mesopotamia. There is also an Akkadian cuneiform cylinder seal dating from c.2300 BC (the time of Sargon) that may show a Mesopotamian ruler in negotiation with Indus merchants, according to its inscription, which refers to Meluhha: the apparent Akkadian name for the Indus region. Without doubt, the Indus civilisation traded extensively with Mesopotamia by sea during the third millennium BC. Such discoveries suggest that Mesopotamia could have played a role in the origin of the Indus script (as mooted above in the Shang culture). Yet there is no proof, and the balance of the evidence – including the utterly different appearances of cuneiform and Indus signs – favours an independent Indus

origin of the script.

Our third mystery relates to Rapa Nui in the Pacific Ocean, one of the most remote inhabited islands on the planet, famous for its giant human figures in stone, the moai. In the 19th century, and possibly long before, Rapa Nui also had a script, although the script does not appear on the moai. Engraved only on wooden tablets – maybe with the tooth of a shark, a flake of obsidian or a sharpened bird bone – some 25 examples of this undeciphered script are scattered around the world's museums, including the British Museum. None of the tablets is formally dated. The script is known as Rongorongo – the name means 'chants or recitations' in the Rapa Nui language, referring to its former use by the islanders. Many of its fascinating glyphs are highly pictographic, including a 'bird-man'.

Is Rongorongo proto-writing or full writing? No one knows, despite more than a century of debate and claimed decipherments, as with the Indus script.

Intriguingly, some of the Rongorongo glyphs closely resemble 40–50 far-distant ancient Indus signs, leading to far-fetched claims of Indus influence across oceans and millennia. Did the islanders invent Rongorongo unprompted, or did they borrow it from another place, perhaps Polynesia or Mesoamerica (home of the less ancient Mayan glyphs), via trans-Pacific contacts? Or did it emerge following the first visit of European sailors on Spanish ships to Rapa Nui in 1770, after the islanders saw the sailors' alphabetic writing? If the independent invention of Rongorongo on isolated Rapa Nui were ever to be proved, this would enormously strengthen the argument that writing had several origins – as opposed to a single origin in Mesopotamia/Egypt.

Andrew Robinson is the author of six books on writing, scripts and decipherment. He is currently researching a study of the origins of writing.

Plaster cast of a tablet from Rapa Nui showing undeciphered Rongorongo script, date unknown.



Wooden neck ornament (gorget) from Rapa Nui with undeciphered Rongorongo inscription, date unknown.

