

EARLY FORMS OF WRITING: CUNEIFORM

The first known system of writing is **Sumerian cuneiform**, which dates back to c. 3300 BCE. It began as a system of simple pictographs (images that represented a single word). For instance, the early pictograph for a duck might be a small image of a duck, and the early pictograph for a warrior might be a stick-figure warrior. The archaic system actually involved dragging the tip of a stylus in the clay to create lines and shapes. It was clumsy to memorize, especially since the scribe had to learn 1,500 symbols for 1,500 different words. (Contrast this with learning only 26 letters in the modern English version of the alphabet. At a Sumerian *edubba*, or tablet-school, it typically took a student twelve years to learn to write Sumerian in cuneiform.)

The pictographs rapidly became more abstract by 2900 BCE. The number of symbols was reduced to 600 signs, which increasingly were phonological. By 2500 BCE the scribe would use a reed stylus with a wedge-shaped tip to stamp or **imprint** (rather than draw) single wedge-shapes in wet clay. (*Cuneiform* comes from the Latin term *cuneus*, meaning "wedge.") The direction of writing changed to left-to-right horizontal rows, which meant a right-handed scribe would not risk smudging his previous writing as he imprinted the words. The scribes also began adjusting the angle of the tablet to make a wider variety of impressions.

Variants of cuneiform script were adopted and used by the Babylonians, Assyrians, Hittites, Elamites, and Akkadians for about 3,000 years. Some of these peoples used cuneiform to record Babylonian alone, but others recorded their own languages in syllabary form (i.e., with each cuneiform symbol representing a single syllable) or a combination of syllabary and logograms (in which one symbol represented a single word). Many signs were **polyvalent**, meaning they could be read either as a syllable in a longer word or read logographically, depending upon context. The last known cuneiform inscription we know of (an essay on astronomy) dates to 75 CE.

Here, for an example, is the cuneiform symbol for "king" in Babylonian.

