

READING THE PAST

CUNEIFORM



C.B.F. WALKER

Cuneiform

Cover A tablet of the Jemdet Nasr period. BM 116730. (See also p. 53.)



1 Neo-Babylonian stone monument commemorating Adad-eṭir and his son Marduk-balassu-iqbi. BM 90834.

Cuneiform

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Preface

Cuneiform writing was for 2,500 years one of the two principal media of literate civilisation, together with Egyptian hieroglyphs. If one adds the 500 years of its slow decline then it matches the length of time for which our own alphabet has been in common use. It is beyond the scope of this book to give even a brief sketch of the history of the different peoples and kingdoms involved. The maps and chronological table, however, are designed to give a basic outline. In any case, our knowledge of the details of chronology often remains inadequate, so many events or changes can only be dated generally to centuries or millennia.

Archaeologists and historians alike have tended to be quite inconsistent in their use of place names, ancient or modern. So, to avoid confusion, I have kept to the ancient names where known, giving the modern names in brackets where common usage has made them well known. Since much of the subject matter is common to the civilisations of Sumer, Babylon and Assyria I frequently use the term Mesopotamia to cover all three.

Assyrian and Babylonian are both dialects of the Akkadian language, and I use all three terms. Transliterations of Akkadian are printed in italic script, while Sumerian is printed in Roman upper or lower case, and translations are printed in quotes.

C. B. F. Walker

1

Origin and Development

Pictographs

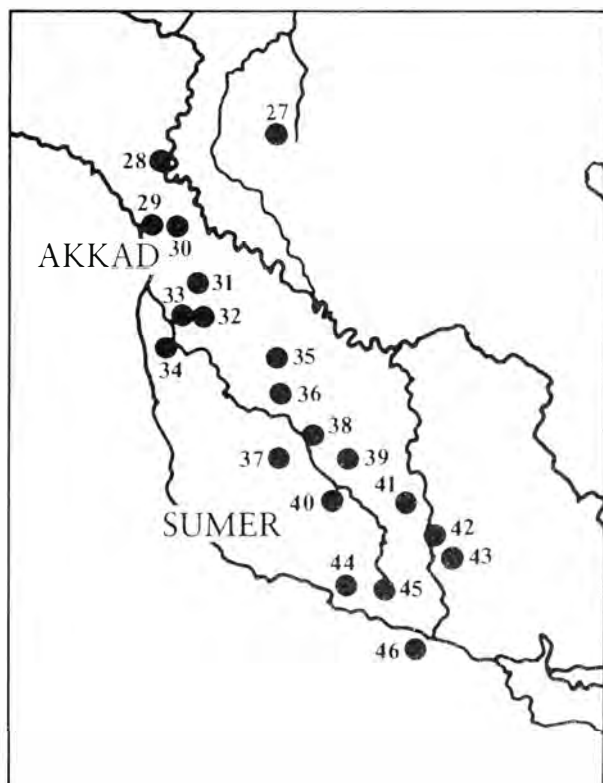
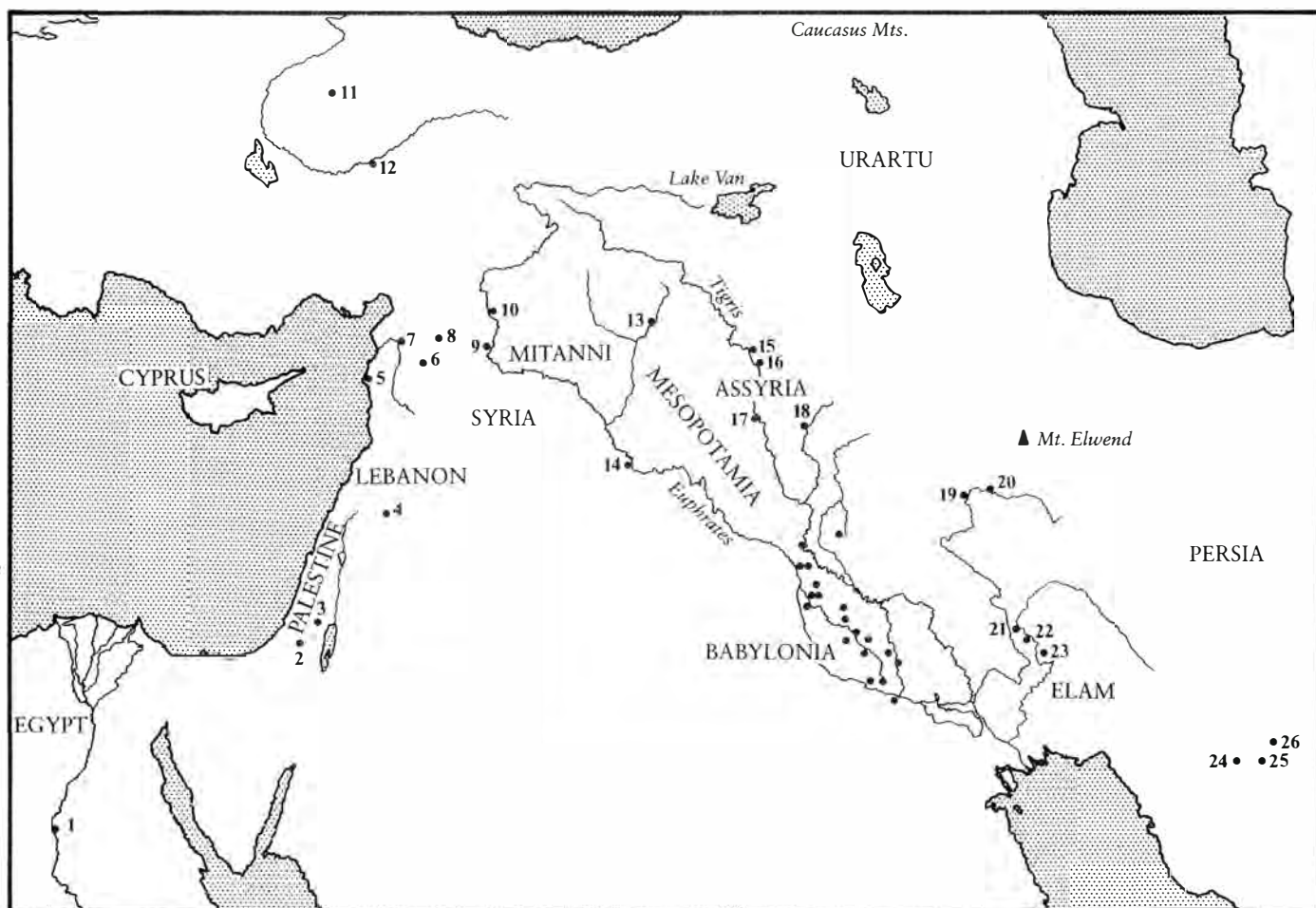
Writing was invented in order to record business activities in the early Near East. With the growth of centralised economies the officials of palaces and temples needed to be able to keep track of the amounts of grain and numbers of sheep and cattle which were entering or leaving their stores and farms. It was impossible to rely on a man's memory for every detail, and a new method was needed to keep reliable records.

When man first began to write he wrote not with pen and ink on paper but by scratching signs on to damp clay with a pointed stick or reed. The raw materials were readily available in the river valleys of the Near East and cost little effort to prepare. Clay can be easily worked into a suitably flat shape for writing on while moist, and if left to dry in the sun after being inscribed will soon be hard enough to stand up to considerable wear and tear.

On the very earliest texts pictures (sometimes called pictographs) were drawn on damp clay using a pointed tool. But quite soon the scribes found it was quicker to produce a stylised representation of an object by making a few marks in the clay rather than attempt an artistic impression by naturalistic drawing in straight or curving lines. These stylised representations then had to be standardised so that everyone could recognise them. Since the scribes were no longer trying to be great artists the drawing instrument did not have to be finely pointed but could be blunt or flat. The end of the wooden or reed stylus, which struck the clay first, made a wider mark than the shaft, and so came into being the typical wedge-shaped impression after which this writing system became known – cuneiform (from the Latin word *cuneus* meaning wedge). Many early tablets show a mixture of signs drawn and written in cuneiform.

Until quite recently the theory presented in most books on Mesopotamian archaeology was that writing was invented in southern Iraq c. 3000 BC, or slightly earlier, perhaps by a Sumerian living in Uruk. Whether or not he was Sumerian is uncertain since the very earliest texts of all are purely pictographic (picture writing) and without phonetic indications to show which language is being written. The suggestion that he lived in Uruk was based on the facts that the earliest evidence for writing was found there and that by 3000 BC the city had already enjoyed a long history.

Today the picture looks rather different. Evidence for early stages of writing in the form of tablets inscribed with numbers only, sometimes also bearing seal impressions, has been found not only at Uruk but also at Nineveh in Iraq, at Susa, Choga Mish and Godin Tepe in western Iran, and at Tell Brak and Habuba Kabira in north Syria; most of these can be dated to the later fourth millennium BC. Next, two tablets from Tell Brak, found in 1984, depict a goat and a sheep, each accompanied by the number 10. They are quite as primitive as anything from Uruk; if anything they may even be earlier, since they show the whole of the animals, whereas pictures on the earliest tablets from Uruk show only the heads of animals. In the east the pictographic texts found at Susa, known as



*Above The Middle East.
Left Babylonia.*

- | | |
|-----------------|------------------|
| 1 El-Amarna | 24 Tall-i-Malyan |
| 2 Lachish | 25 Persepolis |
| 3 Jerusalem | 26 Pasargadae |
| 4 Damascus | 27 Eshnunna |
| 5 Ugarit | 28 Baghdad |
| 6 Ebla | 29 Sippar |
| 7 Alalakh | 30 Tell ed-Der |
| 8 Aleppo | 31 Jemdet Nasr |
| 9 Habuba Kabira | 32 Kish |
| 10 Til Barsip | 33 Babylon |
| 11 Hattusas | 34 Borsippa |
| 12 Kanesh | 35 Abu Salabikh |
| 13 Brak | 36 Nippur |
| 14 Mari | 37 Isin |
| 15 Nineveh | 38 Puzrish-Dagan |
| 16 Kalhu | 39 Adab |
| 17 Ashur | 40 Shuruppak |
| 18 Nuzi | 41 Umma |
| 19 Behistun | 42 Girsu |
| 20 Godin Tepe | 43 Lagash |
| 21 Susa | 44 Uruk |
| 22 Dur-Untash | 45 Larsa |
| 23 Choga Mish | 46 Ur |



2 Pictographic tablets from Tell Brak.

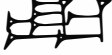
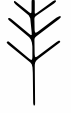
proto-Elamite, appear in an archaeological level which shows marked differences from the previous level, suggesting the arrival of a new cultural group, and since these proto-Elamite texts have now been found as far east as Seistan on the border of Afghanistan, it may be that the script was invented on the Iranian plateau. Study of the early Uruk texts themselves has also suggested that they are dependent on an earlier tradition of pictography which has not yet been found or identified. Thus it is beginning to look as if we should think in terms of the invention of writing as being a gradual process, accomplished over a wide area, rather than the product of a single Sumerian genius.

In practice any meaningful discussion has to start with the tablets found at Uruk in the early archaeological level known as Uruk IV and a slightly later group found in Uruk III. Contemporary with the Uruk III tablets are tablets from Jemdet Nasr to the north and the proto-Elamite tablets from Susa. Historically the Uruk IV–III levels date to *c.* 3300 – 2900 BC. There are both similarities and differences between the tablets from Uruk and Jemdet Nasr and those from Susa, but while the Uruk and Jemdet Nasr tablets are regarded as the beginning of writing in Sumerian, the Susa tablets are seen as the first examples of the still little-understood Elamite language.

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3 A proto-Elamite tablet.
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

   kú eat	   šah pig	   mušen bird	   gi reed	   sag head	   kiri ₆ orchard
   gin/gub walk/stand	   anše donkey	   gu ₄ ox	   dug pot	   šu hand	   gišimmar date-palm
   še barley	   ud day	   áb cow	   pú well	   a water	   ku ₆ fish

4 Table of cuneiform signs showing for each sign the pictographic form (c. 3000 BC), an early cuneiform representation (c. 2400 BC), and the Late Assyrian form (c. 650 BC), now turned through 90 degrees, with the Sumerian phonetic equivalent and meaning.

The inscriptions on these early tablets consist of brief economic records or lists of signs for the instruction of trainee scribes. The signs are mostly pictographic: that is to say the sign for an ox looks like an ox's head, the sign for barley looks like an ear of barley, and the sign for a day is a picture of the sun coming up over the horizon. The pictures quickly take on a cuneiform appearance and are regularly accompanied by numbers, which is enough to suggest that the texts were economic (receipts, delivery notes or inventories). An intensive study of all these early texts by a team from the University of Berlin from a mathematical point of view is slowly producing a better understanding of the meaning of the texts and the nature of the underlying economic system, although we are still a long way from being able to read the texts rather than interpret them.

4

Eighty-five per cent of the tablets from the early levels at Uruk are economic and are concerned with the income and outgoings of the city's temples in terms of food, live-stock and textiles. Remarkably, it has been possible to identify a large number of place names known from the later history of Sumer, mostly within the vicinity of Uruk, but including Kish and Eshnunna to the north, Aratta (somewhere in the mountains of Iran), and Dilmun (modern Bahrein). Fifteen per cent of the texts are lexical lists, including the names of various commodities, animals and officials. These lists were presumably compiled to establish and teach a definitive system of writing recognisable to every scribe. Significantly, exactly the same lists can be found from six hundred years later, showing the strength of the tradition. This continuity has been a great help in identifying many of the early signs which would otherwise have been quite unintelligible. Popular books on cuneiform have tended to give the impression that identifying the early signs is easy; in fact things are not so simple. Pictures of an ox or an ear of barley are identifiable, but there are many signs which we cannot yet explain as pictures even when by working back from the later lexical lists we are able to establish their meaning.

As soon as we are able to read the texts intelligibly, we are confronted by another difficulty. The early texts are not written in neat lines with every sign in the appropriate order – that came later – but with all the signs for each sense unit (or sentence) grouped together in a box (see front cover). The correct order in which to read the signs is thus a matter of interpretation.

Syllabic writing

The texts from Uruk and Jemdet Nasr, although slowly changing from a pictorial to a more linear or cuneiform script, are still largely logographic, that is to say that they use one sign or sign-group for each term or concept without adding grammatical elements. Even the nature of a transaction is not always clear; are the sheep being brought into or out of the temple? We do not know. In any case how could they tell us? Drawing an ox's head to represent an ox is straightforward. But how do you say that the ox is live or dead? How do you record that it has come or gone? And how do you record the name of the person who brought or took it? To communicate these things effectively you need to do more than draw pictures. You have to be able to express ideas. You have to be able to record a spoken language. The alphabet was not invented until 1,500 years later, so the first scribes used syllables instead.

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This syllabic stage of the script's development is known from a group of texts from Ur corresponding to the archaeological levels Early Dynastic I–II (c. 2800 BC). In these

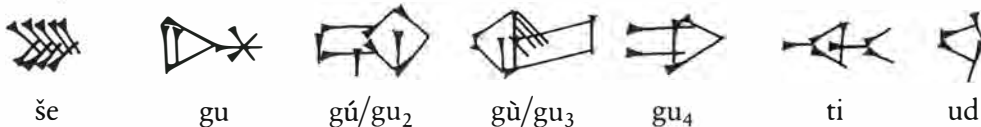
5



5 An archaic tablet from Ur,
c. 2900–2600 BC;
deliveries of barley and
meal to a temple.
BM 128897.

6 (*Opposite*) A tablet of the Fara
type (c. 2600 BC); a record of
numbers of workmen.
BM 21014.

texts we find the first identifiable use of purely phonetic elements and grammar, and as soon as we are able to identify the use of syllables in the cuneiform script we encounter the Sumerian language. The Sumerians may have been responsible for introducing writing at Uruk, but it cannot be proved. Because the script does not perfectly suit all the sounds which linguistic experts find in Sumerian, it has been suggested that the cuneiform script was devised by another people. In any case their origins are uncertain, and they have in the past been thought of as invaders from the eastern mountains. On the other hand the relative cultural continuity in the late Uruk period has suggested to others that the Sumerians were there all along.



In Sumerian the word for barley is še (pronounced ‘she’ as in shepherd), so the sign for barley also became the sign for the syllable še. The Sumerian for ox is gu; but the word for thread is also gu, so already you have two possible ways of writing the sound gu. There are, in fact, some fourteen ways of writing gu, so for convenience we (but not the ancient Sumerians) mark thread as gu and ox as gu₄. The word for arrow is ti, but so is the word for life, so to write ‘life’ you need only write the sign for arrow. The word for mouth is ka (represented as a head with the teeth clearly marked), but the sign ka is also used for the idea of shouting, which is again gu (gu₃ or gù); so the sign KA already has two values, ka and gu₃ (and in fact it can also be used for zú ‘tooth’, du₁₁ ‘speak’, and inim ‘word’). Combining a syllable formed of consonant + vowel (like gu) with one formed from vowel + consonant (like ud ‘day’) allows you to make a closed syllable, gu-ud. In this way you can make up any combination of vowels and consonants, so long as you do not want to put more than two consonants together (no Sumerian cartoonist could write ‘Psst!’). The principle of using several signs to represent the same sound (gu) is called homophony, and giving one sign several values (like KA) is called polyphony. Both principles are fundamental features of cuneiform writing throughout its 3,000 year history.

The early stages of Sumerian writing represented by tablets from Uruk, Jemdet Nasr



and Ur contain no historical material and generally fall outside the scope of historical discussion, being dated solely by archaeological considerations. The only history available for this period is in the form of a later tradition listing kings who lived before the Flood. With the next group of material we enter recorded history in what is known as the Early Dynastic period (II – III). Enmebaragesi, king of Kish (c. 2600 BC), is the first man known to be commemorated by his own inscription (to be seen in the Iraq Museum, Baghdad). Roughly contemporary with him are the tablets from Shuruppak (Fara), known in Sumerian literature as the home of the Sumerian Flood-hero Ziusudra. The tablets from Fara and the slightly later archives from Abu Salabikh and Ebla (in Syria) show the gradual development of the Sumerian script both in the form of the signs and in the flexibility of its use.

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From these three cities come the first major groups of literary texts, including what one might call the first autographs in history, tablets on which the scribes have recorded their own names. The tablets from Abu Salabikh and Ebla show that literature and the study of cuneiform vocabulary were already highly developed. Slightly later again come the administrative archives from Girsu (Tello) and with these we also have a wealth of historical inscriptions to complete the setting. The Early Dynastic III period ends with the accession of Sargon of Akkad (2334–2279 BC), and the beginning of a strong Akkadian influence in politics and language. The Akkadian language is discussed below, but we should consider now one fundamental change in the writing system which seems to have taken place late in the Early Dynastic period – the change in the direction of writing.

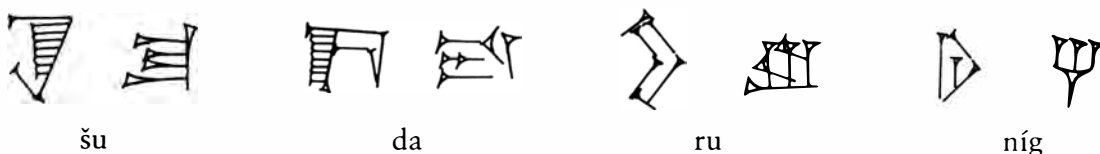
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The direction of the script

The pictographs on the earliest tablets are clearly meant to be read as naturalistic pictures. But when one traces their development through time it becomes apparent that at some point they have been turned through ninety degrees so that they are lying on their backs. The same applies to the overall direction of the script. The Uruk and Jemdet Nasr texts are mostly written on slightly elongated tablets, wider than they are high. The signs are disposed randomly within squares or rectangles. The rectangles are arranged in rows to be read from right to left, and when one row is filled a new row is started beneath it. When the front of the tablet is full up, the tablet is turned left to right and the back of the tablet is inscribed in the same manner but starting from the bottom up. In contrast by 2000 BC tablets are mostly higher than they are wide, and are inscribed with the signs written in order from left to right in long lines. In many cases there is only a single column of script on each face of the tablet, although on some Sumerian texts of the Ur III period (2112–2004 BC) there can be up to eleven columns on each side.

It had been thought that the change in direction of the script took place as early as the Jemdet Nasr period. It was also suggested that the change arose because scribes writing from right to left found they were smudging their handiwork; practical experience in writing cuneiform on clay shows, however, that with good quality clay very little smudging takes place and a conscious effort is needed to erase signs. More importantly, there are historical arguments against an early change in the direction of writing. Until the middle of the second millennium most stone monuments and all inscribed cylinder seals preserve the archaic direction of script. So in reading the inscription on the great law code of Hammurapi one has to hold one's head down on the right shoulder. The direction of the script is obviously intended to preserve an ancient tradition, but it could hardly have become traditional if the direction of writing had changed already in the Jemdet Nasr period before any monumental inscriptions had been written.

The late Adam Falkenstein argued for a change at the end of the Early Dynastic period since some of the tablets from Girsu dated to that period have drawings of animals which can only be viewed the right way up if the script is read as in early times. This seems to be a forceful argument, although there is at least one stone monument from the late Early Dynastic (BM 117936 in the British Museum) which shows three standing figures and an inscription (still only partly legible) which must be read in the later direction (horizontally). There is another small point which seems to have been overlooked up to now. The earliest tablets inscribed in a single column date to the time of Lugalzagesi, king of Uruk, the contemporary and predecessor of Sargon. This too suggests that the change had taken place shortly before. What induced it and how it was imposed remain obscure. One consequence was a reduction in the variety of wedges used to form signs. When read from the direction later customary, many signs used on Early Dynastic tablets have wedges pointing vertically upwards. From Old Akkadian times on, these wedges are almost entirely eliminated, so that the heads of wedges appear only at the top or the left side of a sign.





7 A tablet of the time of Lugalzagesi, king of Uruk (2340–2316 BC). BM 114362.

It may be that the change seemed less significant to the ancient scribes than it does to us. Writing on a small tablet with the tablet held in one hand and the stylus held in the other is a two-handed operation, turning the tablet to impress wedges in different directions. Thus the scribes would have become used to seeing their writing from more than one angle. At all events the scribes of the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods must have been well accustomed to reading public monuments inscribed in the older direction. Today scholars are so familiar with the later direction of the script that most early tablets are published and exhibited the wrong way round.

Sumerian and Akkadian

So far the cuneiform script has been discussed only with reference to Sumerian. From the mid-third millennium onwards it was also used to write the Akkadian language in southern Mesopotamia and the Eblaite language at Ebla in Syria (see Chapter 4). So it may be helpful at this point to make some brief remarks on the nature of the Sumerian and Akkadian languages and the way in which the cuneiform script was used to record them.

The Sumerian language first became known from bilingual texts written in Sumerian and Akkadian and found in the seventh-century BC royal libraries at Nineveh. For some time many scholars refused even to believe that it was a language at all and suggested that it was a scribal trick or a form of cryptography. The discovery of vast archives inscribed unilingually in Sumerian put paid to that idea. The early doubters may, however, be forgiven since Sumerian is quite unlike the well-known Indo-European and Semitic language groups.

Linguists describe the language as agglutinative; each fundamental idea, nominal or verbal, is expressed by a single unchanging syllable (or polysyllable) which may be modified by a series of prefixes or postfixes, somewhat as in modern Turkish. Thus ‘son’ is *dumu*, ‘sons’ *dumu-meš*, ‘his sons’ *dumu-meš-a-ni*, ‘for his sons’ *dumu-meš-a-ni-ir* (for explanation of *š* see p. 12). The verb ‘build’ is *dù*, ‘he built’ *ì-dù* or *mu-dù*, ‘he did not build’ *nu-mu-dù*. So ‘For Ningirsu his god Gudea built his temple’ is *Ningirsu dingir-ra-ni-ir Gudea é-a-ni mu-dù*. So far so good, but the scribes were hardly consistent in their implementation of the system. In fact in the early periods many of the verbal prefixes and postfixes were not written at all; the sign *dù* expressed the idea ‘build’ and the rest had to be supplied by the reader. In some respects the Sumerian script never quite escapes from the fact that it was originally designed for the purpose of practical book-keeping rather than to express abstract ideas. When we reach the Old Babylonian period (2004–1595 BC), the time when most of the available literary texts were copied, we find

that many duplicates of these texts use different groups of prefixes or postfixes. That does not make it easy to write a grammar of Sumerian.

The Sumerian language uses only four vowels: a, e, i, u; two half vowels: w and y; and the following consonants: b, d, g, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, z, ḥ, ḡ, š. The ḥ corresponds to a hard h, ḡ is a nasalised g, and š corresponds to English sh.

In addition to writing out a text phonetically the Sumerian scribes gave themselves extra clues for their own decipherment by adding certain specific signs to mark different categories of objects. So wooden objects might have the prefix ḡš, stone objects na₄, copper objects urudu, cities uru; birds have the postfix mušen, fish ku₆, cities ki (some cities are even uru-X-ki).

If all of this seems complicated, matters get worse when one tries to use the Sumerian system for the Akkadian language, for which it was not designed and to which it is not well suited.

Akkadian is one of the Semitic languages, together with Arabic, Hebrew, Aramaic, etc. It has three dialects: Old Akkadian, Babylonian and Assyrian; so by definition anything written in Babylonian or Assyrian can equally be said to be written in Akkadian. Each of these dialects tends to use a slightly variant form of the cuneiform script, although all handbooks to cuneiform take them as one. As in the other Semitic languages, Akkadian words basically have a root of three consonants, e.g. *prs*, which is then modified internally by the doubling of consonants or insertion of vowels, and externally by the addition of prefixes or postfixes, e.g. *iprus*, *purus*, *iparrasūni*. Thus in principle no single cuneiform sign could carry the meaning of an Akkadian word, and the practical solution was to write words out phonetically. To a large extent this happened, but additionally Akkadian-speaking scribes used Sumerian signs to express Akkadian terms, e.g. Sumerian *udu-meš* for Akkadian *imмерū*, 'sheep', or mixed the two, e.g. Sumerian *gal* = 'great', but *gal-u* = Akkadian *rabū*, 'great'. (For clarity Assyriologists write Sumerian in normal script or capitals and Akkadian in italics.)

The Akkadian language as attested in the cuneiform texts uses the same four vowels as Sumerian: a, e, i, and u, having probably lost the vowel o under the influence of Sumerian. In addition to the semivowels w and y it uses the following consonants: b, d, g, k, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, t, z, ḥ, š, ś, š, ṭ and the glottal stop ʔ. The Sumerian ḡ is not used in Akkadian but becomes g. The Semitic languages have three h-sounds, h, ḥ and ḥ; Arabic has all three, Hebrew uses only h and ḥ; Akkadian, under the influence of Sumerian, uses only ḥ. Akkadian originally had three sibilants s, ś, and š, but after the Old Akkadian period ś drops out of use. The three emphatic sounds š, ṭ and q, the glottal stop ʔ, and the letter p which are used in Akkadian, do not occur in Sumerian. Thus the Sumerian script was never ideally suited to writing Akkadian. A new sign was invented for ʔ, but otherwise several different conventions were used at different times and in different areas to get over the problems. The distinctions between b and p, between d, t, and ṭ, and between g, k and q are never consistently marked in the script. It is curious that no single agreed solution was ever enforced, such was the strength of the old tradition.

In taking over and adapting the Sumerian syllabary the Akkadian-speaking scribes added to it still further values, increasing the aspects of homophony and polyphony. Thus the Sumerian sign á 'hand' corresponds to Akkadian *idu* 'hand'; hence the sign comes to be used for the syllable *id*, and also for *it*, *it*, *ed*, *et* and *et*. The total number of distinct cuneiform signs in use from the late third millennium onwards is about six

hundred, and the number of possible values is far higher. The possible variations did not create as many problems as one might suppose, however, since at any given period and for any given class of text a rather more limited repertoire of signs was used, making life easier both for the scribe and the modern reader. Also in most cases the correct reading of a sign is made clear by the context and by the preceding and following signs.

Although Sumerian had dropped out of common use as a spoken language by the eighteenth century BC and was superseded by Akkadian, it continued to be used by the scribes both as a regular form of shorthand (as in writing *udu* for *immeru*), in composing many monumental inscriptions (for the sake of tradition), and in copying and recopying Sumerian word-lists and literary texts. By the first millennium for their own convenience the scribes frequently copied Sumerian literature with each Sumerian line followed by its Akkadian translation. The very latest of all cuneiform texts, astronomical texts of the first century AD, are almost entirely written in Sumerian logograms.

The historical divisions

The development of cuneiform during the early Sumerian period has been briefly sketched above. Its further progress is now briefly outlined in order to make the historical terminology intelligible. The accession of Sargon I in 2334 BC marked the beginning of the dynasty of Akkad; the basic language of texts written at this time was Akkadian, specifically the Old Akkadian dialect. With the decline of that dynasty around 2200 BC Akkad was eclipsed and Sumerian became the regular language of administration again, although throughout the next thousand years later kings frequently called themselves kings of Sumer and Akkad. Under the Third Dynasty of Ur (or Ur III) a massive growth of royal bureaucracy occurred which has left us a larger amount of administrative texts than all the other periods of Mesopotamian history put together. Almost every collection of tablets includes Ur III texts.

After the fall of Ur in 2004 BC the dominant dynasties were those of Isin, Larsa and Babylon, in that order. By 1900 BC with the ascendancy of Larsa, Sumerian had again ceased to be the prevalent language and finally gave way permanently to Akkadian. Although the dynasty of Babylon only took control of Sumer and Akkad in 1763 BC in the reign of Hammurapi, the time from 2004 to 1595 BC is commonly known as the Old Babylonian period, and all Akkadian texts of this time are described as Old Babylonian. Texts from the time of the succeeding Kassite Dynasty and the Second Dynasty of Isin are described as Middle Babylonian; this is also the date of the international correspondence found at El-Amarna in Egypt, mostly written in Babylonian, and the archives of Ugarit in Syria. In many respects tablets of the Middle Babylonian period retain a strong similarity in form and script to the earlier ones. The Babylonian texts written in the first millennium BC are quite distinct, but their nomenclature has caused problems. Some scholars describe tablets from 1000 BC to the beginning of the Chaldean (or Neo-Babylonian) Dynasty as Neo-Babylonian, and describe all later tablets as Late Babylonian. Others draw the dividing line after the defeat of the Chaldean Dynasty by Cyrus in 539 BC. There is also a separate literary dialect known as Standard Babylonian which is used in both Babylonia and Assyria.

From the time of Alexander the Great onwards the use of the cuneiform script is increasingly restricted, being superseded by Aramaic; a few legal and literary texts were still written in cuneiform as late as 40 BC, and the last astronomical text is datable to 8

75 AD. The latest texts have a very cursive script and can be extremely difficult to read.

Some of the earliest texts from Assyria are written in Old Babylonian, but a very distinctive group of tablets found at Kanesh (Kultepe) in eastern Turkey proved to be the commercial records of a trading colony from Ashur of the nineteenth century BC. They employ a quite distinctive script and dialect and are identified as Old Assyrian. From the area of Assyria come the fifteenth-century tablets found at Nuzi, but since they show the town to have been controlled by the Hurrian kingdom of Mitanni they are not regarded as Assyrian but are simply described as Nuzi texts. Middle Assyrian texts, mostly from Ashur, begin with the first expansion of Assyria outside its homeland in the thirteenth century BC. The great majority of Assyrian texts, however, belong to the Neo-Assyrian period (1000–609 BC), and come from the royal archives at Nineveh and Kalhu. There is one great advantage in dealing with these texts – they employ a very standardised script. It was fortunate for Assyriologists that these were the first large archives to become available.

The historical development of the cuneiform script which occupies scholars so much today also fascinated the ancient scribes. The collections from Babylon contain many late copies of early historical inscriptions or legal texts made in the seventh or sixth century BC by scribes who had found the originals in temples, private collections or even

Chronological table

Dates (BC)	Sumer/Babylon	Assyria	Elsewhere
3300–2900	Uruk IV–III and Jemdet Nasr periods Brak tablets		Proto-Elamite Susa archives
2900–2600	Early Dynastic I–II period Archaic Ur tablets		
2600–2334	Early Dynastic II–III Enmebaragesi of Kish, <i>c.</i> 2600 Fara tablets Abu Salabikh tablets Ebla archives Girsu (Enannatum I <i>c.</i> 2400) Lugalzagesi of Uruk (2340–2316)		
2334–2154	Dynasty of Akkad Old Akkadian Sargon of Akkad (2334–2279) Naram-Sin (2254–2218) Gudea of Lagash (2141–2122)		Puzur-Inshushinak of Elam
2112–2004	Ur III Dynasty Umma, Puzrish-Dagan and Girsu archives Ur-Nammu (2112–2095) Shulgi (2094–2047)		
2004–1595	Old Babylonian period Archives from Larsa, Nippur, Eshnunna, Sippar, Tell ed-Der, Ur, Kish Sin-kashid of Uruk (<i>c.</i> 1790)	Old Assyrian archives from Kanesh (19th century)	
1894–1595	First Dynasty of Babylon Hammurapi (1792–1750) Samsuiluna (1749–1712)		Mari archives Zimri-Lim (1775–1759)
<i>c.</i> 1550–1155	Kassite Dynasty (Middle Babylonian)		Hittite archives at Boghazkoy (17th–13th century)