

CUNEIFORM WRITING

The writing sticks the Sumerians used had a wedge-shaped end. So, when they started using it to create shapes, the writing became wedge-shaped too. Historians call this kind of writing 'cuneiform', which means 'wedge-shaped'. It was used in Mesopotamia for more than 3,000 years.



Here you can see a clay tablet including the pictograph for 'grain'.



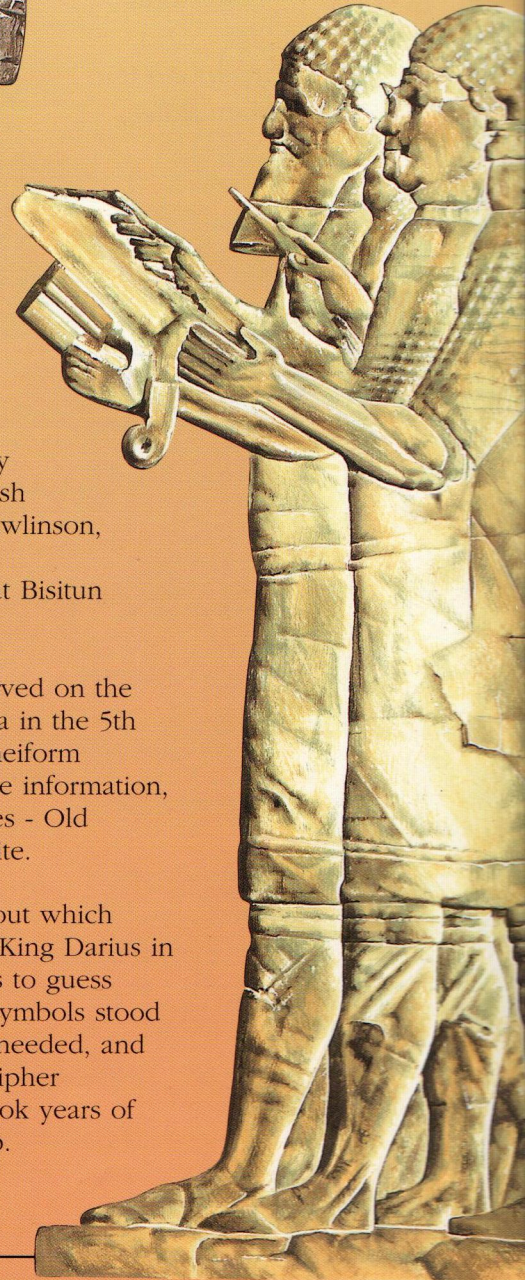
On this later tablet, the cuneiform sign for 'grain' is used instead.



INTERNET LINK

For a link to a website where you can explore the world of an early Mesopotamian scribe, go to www.usborne-quicklinks.com

Assyrian scribes like these would still have used cuneiform, about 3,000 years after its invention.



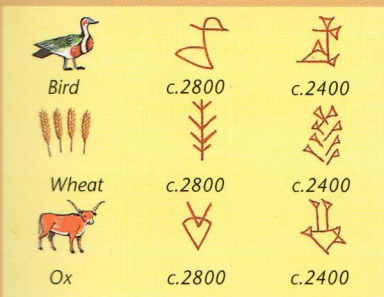
CRACKING THE CODE

Cuneiform gradually died out and was forgotten for about two thousand years. When the first archaeologists came across the inscriptions on ancient clay tablets, they had no idea what they meant.

Cuneiform remained a mystery until 1844. That year, an English army officer, named Henry Rawlinson, completed his study of some inscriptions found on a rock at Bisitun in western Iran.

The rock, which had been carved on the orders of King Darius of Persia in the 5th century BC, showed three cuneiform inscriptions recording the same information, but in three different languages - Old Persian, Babylonian and Elamite.

Rawlinson managed to work out which shapes made up the name of King Darius in the Persian part, and used this to guess what some of the cuneiform symbols stood for. This was just the clue he needed, and eventually he was able to decipher cuneiform itself. Even so, it took years of hard work to finish off the job.



These three examples show the way Sumerian writing developed from pictures (pictographs) into cuneiform symbols.

Cuneiform was a very successful writing system and was adapted by other Mesopotamian peoples to write down their different languages. The Akkadians, the Elamites and, further afield, the Hittites used cuneiform signs in different ways - sometimes to represent things as pictographs had done, sometimes to represent sounds or even to form the letters of an alphabet.

Henry Rawlinson became the first modern historian to understand cuneiform by studying this 2,500-year-old rock carving at Bisitun, Iran.