The Uses of Writing

Inscribed Objects and Texts in the Middle East Galleries

Written texts and inscribed objects are an essential part of the stories told in the Middle East Galleries and feature throughout the rooms and cases, offering a broad and holistic picture of the origins, development, and uses of writing.

By Steve Tinney
ABOVE: Folio detail from the Nizami manuscript written in the Persian language in Arabic script. PM object NEP33.17.

OPPOSITE: Flood Tablet discovered in Nippur, Iraq. Written in Sumerian cuneiform, it deals with the creation of humans, prediluvian cities and their rulers, and the flood. PM object B10673.
As we thought about the role of writing in the development of civilization in the Middle East, from its first appearance onwards, one of our decisions was to focus on its social importance rather than the technical and technological details. This was because the Museum is planning a future gallery that will be dedicated to the historical development of writing. Nevertheless, the Middle East Galleries reveal much about writing and its uses.

**Early Writing in the Middle East**

The earliest writing in the ancient Middle East, dating to the end of the 4th millennium BCE, was pictographic, meaning that it consisted primarily of signs that were simple illustrations of what they represented. Numbers were made with lines, circles, and rectangles. Pictographic symbols quickly evolved into cuneiform—wedge-shaped—signs as scribes changed their practice from drawing with a pointed stylus to impressing wedge-shapes in leather-hard clay with the corner angles of a shaped stylus. In early texts, signs are clearly separated and differentiated. As time went on, the signs were further simplified and written smaller and closer together.

Cuneiform writing, like its pictographic predecessor, was not alphabetic. It originated with a system of ideograms in which a sign stood for one or more Sumerian words which were usually related: for example, the KA sign stood for ka, “mouth”; inim, “word”; gu, “voice”; and dug, “speak”. A modern analogy is the use of a picture of a heart, sometimes read “love” and sometimes “heart.”

Early in the history of cuneiform, possibly even in its pictographic stage, someone had the idea of using just the sound part of the sign to represent a syllable, so the KA sign also stood for the sound “ka.” We call this “rebus” writing and it is the same principle as children’s stories which substitute images for words, e.g. a picture of an eye to stand for “I.” By contrast to the hundreds of ideograms which were in use, a repertoire of about 80 syllabic signs was sufficient for anything a scribe needed to write. Throughout its long life (over 3,000 years, from about 3000 BCE to the 1st century CE), cuneiform was written with varying mixtures of ideograms and syllabic signs.

**Other Scripts and Languages in the Galleries**

Cuneiform, however, is not the only script in the Galleries. The text on the large alabaster vase in the Empires section is inscribed in Akkadian, Egyptian, and Old Persian cuneiform (a distinct form of cuneiform writing). The Aramaic script is used on some of the Murashu tablets and on the incantation bowls, and beautiful writing in the Arabic script is on display in the Qur’an and in the Persian Nizami manuscript. These scripts are representative of a major development which began only in the first half of the 1st millennium BCE: the invention of the alphabet, originally written only with consonants and later with distinct vowels as well.

The Galleries also contain an array of languages written in each of these scripts. Cuneiform is used primarily for Sumerian (a language isolate, linguistically unrelated to any others) and Akkadian (a language related to Aramaic, Hebrew, and Arabic). The Aramaic script was used for Aramaic, Hebrew, and Middle Persian (i.e. Persian from the 3rd century BCE to the 7th century CE, between the cuneiform and Arabic scripts), and the Arabic script was used for both Arabic (the Qur’an) and Persian (Nizami) and later for Turkish and the languages of other Muslim peoples as they became literate.

**Writing and Administration**

Writing was first adopted for recording commodities and transactions. Fittingly, the very first text the visitor sees—although it dates to about 2,000 years after the invention of writing—is a large, ancient “spreadsheet” with clearly defined rows and columns filled with cuneiform numbers.

The use of writing in accounting and business continues with a stone account detailing allocations of land use, which is the earliest tablet in the Middle East Galleries.
Cuneiform Writing Basics

ABOVE: This stone tablet from Tello, Iraq, dates to about 2800 BCE. The text concerns land use of various people and was written on stone because of the importance of real estate documents. PM object B10000.

LEFT: A scribe learns to write cuneiform on a clay tablet by repeating the same sign over and over.

BELOW: Cuneiform evolved from earlier pictographic symbols, such as the KA sign seen here: pictographic version ca. 3000 BCE (left) and cuneiform version ca. 2100 BCE (right).
Tablets for All Purposes

ABOVE: A clay tablet from Nippur, excavated by the Museum in 1890, may be considered one of the world’s oldest spreadsheets. PM object B3293. LEFT: The Epic of Gilgamesh Tablet preserves the story of Enkidu’s meeting with the prostitute, Shamhat, and how he becomes a city-dweller. PM object B7771. BELOW: This unbaked Murashu tablet from Nippur includes Aramaic. PM object B5372.
Other tablets include a list of craftspeople; tablets from the traders of Assyria and Ur; accounts and contracts large and small from the great dynasty of Ur, which reached its pinnacle under King Shulgi (2094–2047 BCE); and a selection from the archives of the Murashu family who traded throughout the ancient Middle East in the 5th century BCE.

**Writing, Religion, and Power**

Soon after its adoption for administration, writing became widely used for religious purposes. Kings had inscriptions written upon the objects they dedicated to the gods, sometimes simply recording their devotion and sometimes telling the stories of their victories or pious building efforts. All manner of items in a newly built temple could be inscribed: functional items, such as bricks, drains, and door-sockets, as well as larger dedicated monuments, such as statues and stelae. The inscriptions are sometimes reinforced with imagery as in the Ur-Namma Stele, and the Stele of Hammurabi, which combines a written collection of laws with an image of the king receiving the symbols of kingship from the sun-god Shamash, underscoring his divinely given right to establish the law.

The increasingly widespread use of writing for administration and trade enabled cities to become city-states, and city-states to become empires. The combination of a need for a literate cohort of scribes and an appreciation of the special nature of writing is evidenced in the scribal schoolrooms of Nippur from the 18th century BCE. These tablets, from Penn’s earliest excavations in the Middle East, allow us to trace how the students were trained from their first wedges in the clay to the highest levels of proficiency. Writing became associated with social privilege and authority, with the result that it was a skill taught only to the scribal class and reserved for them. It did not become a universal ideal until the Industrial Revolution.

Scribes learned not only language and writing but the entire cultural repertoire of the scribal class. Their studies included the epic of Gilgamesh, with its emphasis on writing as a way of preserving knowledge, establishing fame, and achieving immortality by creating inscriptions and works of literature. The great king Shulgi was also memorialized in the schools, where students copied his hymns and inscriptions for centuries after his death. Shulgi was considered the brother of Gilgamesh in ancient Ur and Nippur and had similar aspirations to immortality through writing, which are nicely fulfilled by his central place in the Galleries.

**Scribal Scholarship and Intellectual History**

The intellectual history spanned by the Middle East Galleries is impressive. An early myth of Enlil and Ninhursag marks the starting point of this trajectory, set in the remotest times of a polytheistic world in which each city had its own collection of gods and its own tales of how the ranking of multiple gods, and of cities, developed.

About a thousand years later, when writing was more widely used for story-telling and literature, the Sumerian Flood story explores the central role of the god of wisdom and magic in the survival of humanity and its knowledge. The god is called Enki in Sumerian and Ea in Akkadian. The flood story also features in the Gilgamesh Epic, in which it is reworked into a cautionary tale about the fragility of the survival of knowledge that is not written down. Gilgamesh’s life is only made meaningful by the fact that his exploits are inscribed on a stone tablet and preserved for posterity.

At the same time, versions of a flood account are found both in the Hebrew Bible and in the Qur’an, and the inclusion of the Qur’an in the Galleries brings the importance of writing to a new level, one in which a monotheistic religion holds the authority of the written text to be absolute. Since writing was associated with authority, the Bible became “script”-ure, and when the Qur’an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel in the 7th century CE, it was understood to be uncreate, co-eternal with the Divinity. Scholarship developed as the study of these religious texts.

Other forms of scholarship are also evidenced. Mesopotamian scholars took omens from all manner of sources.
Readings were taken from natural events or phenomena, such as the locations of towns, the color of fungus in a house, or celestial events like the eclipse mentioned in one of our tablets. Omens were also sought, often in a ritual which involved sacrificing a lamb or kid and reading its internal organs, as illustrated by the model of sheep’s lungs and the diagram of animal intestines on display.

Writing was an integral part of magical and medical knowledge and practice. Prescriptions for poultices are preserved in our medical tablet from about 2300 BCE. Hundreds of rituals and incantations were recorded in ancient Mesopotamia, and the act of writing on objects which might be buried or broken as part of the ritual is well-attested. It is also vividly illustrated by the incantation bowls which date from the end of the 1st millennium BCE and were often buried in houses as part of rituals.

While tiny and broken, a letter from the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE) to the scholar Urad-Gula gives us a window into the world of cuneiform scholarship which reached its apex in the 1st millennium BCE. Urad-Gula had evidently written to the king on a previous occasion mentioning an incantation with the first line “Ninkilim, exorcist of Ninurta, fall of the heavens” about which Esarhaddon incredulously writes “what is this? The heavens exist forever?”

Writing after Cuneiform

The death of cuneiform in the 1st century CE spelled the demise of most of its culture, and though remnants can be traced through the centuries leading up to the emergence of Islam and Persianate culture, the schools and scholars of the Islamic and Persianate world cannot be traced directly to the Babylonian ones, and in some ways the intellectual endeavors are qualitatively different. The Nizami manuscript, a jewel in our collections, was copied on fine polished rag paper in Shiraz (present-day Iran) between late December 1582 CE and mid-June 1584 CE. Transcribed and illustrated hundreds of times, Nizami’s quintet of stories, originally composed by him in Ganja (present-day Azerbaijan) between 1173–1202 CE, was the most copied work in Persian. It formed a key part of Persianate culture retelling the exploits, adventures, and travails of past heroes, including Alexander the Great, and served as a “mirror for princes.”

All in all, the central tenet of the Middle East Galleries, that city life then has much in common with city life now, applies to the selection of written materials in the Galleries and the stories they tell or support. Much changes over the course of the millennia, but many of the fundamentals remain identifiably the same.

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