EARLY WRITING
Foreword  Dr Chris McAuliffe
Preface  Christopher J Davey
Early writing  Christopher J Davey
Catalogue of works in the exhibition  Christopher J Davey
A comparison of alphabetic scripts
The Australian Institute of Archaeology has a collection of objects that illustrate early writing in Egypt and Mesopotamia. This material was acquired either in the early twentieth century by the founder of the Institute, Walter J Beasley, or obtained as a result of a division of finds from excavations supported financially by the Institute during the 1940s and 1950s.

The objects selected for the exhibition demonstrate the diversity of materials used for writing, the development of scripts, and the range of uses for which writing was employed. The collection is mainly from Egypt and Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), reflecting the focus of the Institute. It was in these areas that the earliest forms of writing were developed and from which we trace most Western scripts.

The Institute's collection was on display at Ancient Times House, Melbourne, until 1999. It is now being relocated to a site adjacent to La Trobe University where a permanent exhibition of objects, such as those displayed in this exhibition, will be re-established.

**FOREWORD**

It is hardly surprising that the origins of writing should be the focus of an exhibition at the University of Melbourne. The written word, as record of the past and articulation of the present, lies at the heart of academic activity. And yet there is still an element of surprise to this exhibition. As Christopher Davey notes, we often take writing for granted. When we encounter earlier scripts, writing implements and supports, we are reminded of the many remarkable threads in the lineage of the written word. On display are familiar forms of writing—official pronouncements, bureaucratic records—and others that are now less common—spells and incantations. This exhibition, then, is an opportunity to rediscover the marvel that is writing and to reflect on its continued centrality to formal scholarship and everyday life alike.

We are grateful to both Dr Tony Sagona of the University of Melbourne’s Centre for Classics and Archaeology for initiating this exhibition, and Christopher Davey, of the Australian Institute of Archaeology, for bringing it to fruition. Through them, visitors have access to a remarkable array of objects generously loaned by the Australian Institute of Archaeology. In addition, we have access to the scholarship of academics from across Australia and the world. The interpretation and translation of diverse ancient texts represents the classical values of the university, not only in the scholars’ dedication to inquiry but also in their determination to share their knowledge.

**PREFACE**

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**Christopher J Davey**  
Director, Australian Institute of Archaeology
E A R L Y  W R I T I N G

Compiled by Christopher J Davey

INTRODUCTION
Writing, the form of communication we now use, is normally taken for granted even though in the sweep of human experience it is a comparatively recent achievement. For millennia people relied on word of mouth and various symbolic means to relate to one another. But such techniques depend on memory and immediate contact, so the amount and complexity of information that can be transmitted and recalled is limited. Writing addressed these shortcomings and it is therefore not surprising that many consider it to be the cornerstone of civilisation.

In many respects the world is now organised around writing. Our lives start with birth certificates and end with wills. Schooling, where we learn to read and write, is deemed a right. International relations, commerce, government, religion, science, the arts and leisure all depend on the written word. The preservation of records and literature is an obligation, and the burning of libraries, as recently seen in Iraq, is considered a crime against humanity. There are now literally millions of books. The biblical writer nearly 3,000 years ago lamented as he concluded his work: ‘Of the making of books there is no end, and much study wearyeth the body’ (Ecclesiastes 12:12). He would be lost for words today.

The development of the radio and television has facilitated oral and visual communication over large distances, but even in these media presenters are often reading from a script. But the spoken words pass and are lost, but even in these media presenters are often reading from a script. But the spoken words pass and are lost, but even in these media presenters are often reading from a script. But the spoken words pass and are lost, but even in these media presenters are often reading from a script. But the spoken words pass and are lost, but even in these media presenters are often reading from a script. But the spoken words pass and are lost, but even in these media presenters are often reading from a script. But the spoken words pass and are lost, but even in these media presenters are often reading from a script. But the spoken words pass and are lost, but even in these media presenters are often reading from a script. But the spoken words pass and are lost, but even in these media presenters are often reading from a script. But the spoken words pass and are lost.

THE COMPLEXITY OF WRITING
Many of us forget the complexity of the writing process because we have learnt a system of writing from an early age. It is not until we face a new script that we realise the difficulty associated with learning to read and write. Even if we take the time to learn a script, failure to regularly use it and the language it conveys will soon lead to forgetfulness. Historically, the non-alphabetic scripts were the domain of scribes who had mastered and practised the large number of symbols used. For others, there was not the opportunity or resources to grow vast quantities of grain and foodstuffs, but the regions were devoid of resources such as wood and metal. The production of food had to be recorded with wills. Schooling, where we learn to read and write, is deemed a right. International relations, commerce, government, religion, science, the arts and leisure all depend on the written word. The preservation of records and literature is an obligation, and the burning of libraries, as recently seen in Iraq, is considered a crime against humanity. There are now literally millions of books. The biblical writer nearly 3,000 years ago lamented as he concluded his work: ‘Of the making of books there is no end, and much study wearyeth the body’ (Ecclesiastes 12:12). He would be lost for words today.

THE ORIGINS OF WRITING
We are all familiar with modern signs and symbols that convey meanings, such as ‘no smoking’, ‘men’s toilets’, ‘telephone’ etc. The capacity to convey meaning in this manner was an important solution to the complexities of trade and administration that developed along the rivers of Mesopotamia and Egypt over 5,000 years ago. Irrigation allowed people living in these regions to grow vast quantities of grain and foodstuffs, but the regions were devoid of resources such as wood and metal. The production of food had to be recorded. At some point, the symbols started to represent sounds of the spoken language and when joined in sequence would represent words, phrasas and sentences. This was a quantum leap in practice and it marks the start of writing as we now know it. It is not known where this first occurred, but it is assumed that it was in Mesopotamia a little over 5,500 years ago. The fact that scripts used in Egypt, Mesopotamia and later China bear no relationship to one another does not mean that the idea of using symbols for sounds did not travel from one place to another. The differences in the scripts could have been the result of the variety of materials used for writing and the different sounds being represented. The earliest scripts generally represent syllables. There is debate about this where hieroglyphs are concerned. The number of symbols required to write a language using this system runs into the hundreds. Chinese is the major syllabic script in use today.

Soon after 1,500 BCE in the Eastern Mediterranean, alphabetic scripts began to appear. Some of these use cuneiform symbols, but soon letters formed by lines became the normal system. This is known as Phoenician, and it is the basis of nearly all alphabetic scripts known today. Early examples of these scripts have only come to light in any great number in the last fifty years and are therefore retained in the countries where they were found.

Writing is not language. Cuneiform, the wedge-like script displayed in this exhibition, was employed from 3,500 BCE until 75 CE and was used to represent twenty-five languages. During this time, the Egyptian language was recorded with scripts known as hieroglyphs and hieratic, then demotic and, finally in the Christian era, by Coptic, a script derived from the Greek alphabet. All of these scripts are to be found in the exhibition. English uses the script of a language no longer in general use, Latin, as do most of the languages of Europe. Greece retains the alphabetic script that was devised over 3,500 years ago, while Turkey abandoned the Arabic script in 1928 in favour of the Latin script. Knowledge of a script does not automatically render an understanding of the language and nor does it automatically allow a language to be pronounced. One only has to think of the different ways in which Europe’s languages are articulated. A number of scripts only recorded consonants, leaving the vowels to be spoken by the reader; Arabic and Hebrew often do this today. Such scripts assume a regular wide-spread use of the language.
This catalogue of works has been prepared with the assistance of information supplied by Dr Murray Adamthwaite, the University of Melbourne; Ben Foster, William Laffan Professor of Assyriology and Babylonian Literature, Yale University, New Haven, US; Dr Geoff Jenkins, Honorary Fellow, Deakin University, Melbourne; Dr Roya Oskouie, Senior Lecturer in Egyptology, Macquarie University, Sydney; John Tall, Professor of Egyptology, University College, London, and Dr Youhanna Nessim Youssef, Australian Catholic University, Melbourne.

Translations of early writing given here aim to be as literal as possible. This has occasionally resulted in awkard English expression.

Ancient cities

Alalakh: Ancient Syrian city in the Orontes (Asi) river valley (modern Tell Açana, southern Turkey)

Babylon: Ruins are located on the Euphrates River about 88 km south of Baghdad, Iraq

Isin: Capital of an ancient Semitic kingdom of north Babylonia, to the west of the Euphrates (modern-day Ishan al-Bahriyat)

Kish: Ancient Mesopotamian city-state (modern Tall al-Uhaimer) located east of Babylon in what is now south-central Iraq

Nimrud: Ancient Assyrian capital city of Calah situated south-east of Mosul in northern Iraq

Umm el-Jir: The site of an ancient city located east of Babylon and Kish

1 Royal Assyrian monumental inscribed stone: a king seeks immortality

Nimrud, 883–59 BCE
Gypsum
48 x 37 x 9 cm (irreg.)
IA5.034

This Assyrian text occurs in several versions on stone plaques from various sites. It records the names, genealogy, titles and epithets of King Assur-nasir-pal (II), and outlines his conquests to Carchemish in the north-west, and to Babylonia (Kardunias) in the south-east. Apart from the King’s self-description as ‘the merciless weapon’ and similar ferocious epithets, of interest is his note of the reconstruction of the city Kalhu (now Nimrud), and construction of a canal from the Great Zab River to the city, calling it Patti-hegalli. He also records construction of a palace made from materials obtained as a result of his conquests.

Other versions of the text lay a blessing on any future prince who does restoration, and curse anyone who removes the King’s name. The present text lacks this formula but it does demonstrate the use of writing by a king to establish his contemporary importance and his place in history.

2 Pictogram tablet (replica): the beginnings of writing

Kish, c. 3500 BCE
Plaster
7 x 7 x 2 cm
IA21.110

This is a copy of a very early tablet now in the Pennsylvania Museum (there are none such in Australia), and it is still only partially understood. It comes from a pre-writing phase when symbols were used to represent objects and numbers rather than sounds. The text records various quantities of produce from land holdings as offerings for the temple. Whether the land belongs to temple or ruler, or is held privately, is not clear.

The circles in some squares indicate the number ten (10); the pot inside an open receptacle denotes a pot of beer, and the criss-cross pattern in two of the squares (obverse) depicts a house or temple.

3 Cuneiform tablet from Sumer: a record of commercial transactions

Umm el-Jir, c. 2500 BCE
Fired clay
10 x 9 x 2.5 cm
IA7.823

The tablet illustrates a well-developed form of cuneiform writing. It lists expenditures for grain in Akkadian, the language of Sumer at that time. It starts at the top left with ‘216.2.4.5 sīla Agade gur-mah of barley: regular [ration] …’ The text also records various quantities of barley, 2 1/2 ban [for] beer, 30 gur of legumes, 1 1/2 ban [for] bread, 30 gur of legumes, 1 1/2 ban [for] bread, and a list of unidentified wooden objects, together with the names of the people to whom the allocations were made.

The text was either part of an official archive of an Akkadian royal domain during the reign of Naram-Sin (2291–30 BCE) or private documents of a household that was responsible for administering that domain.

A gur-mah ‘the greater gur’ was a measure of capacity, in this era equal to 240 sīla, and in modern equivalent about 240 litres approximately. Only slowly were standards coming into vogue, hence these measures varied from place to place. Naram-Sin made moves to institute some uniformity. A ban was a smaller measure, 1/30 gur, in modern equivalent about 8 litres.

Other tablets from Umm el-Jir are in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and at Yale University.
Cuneiform tablet from Northern Syria: a record of military arrangements

Alalakh (Level IV), c. 1450 BCE
fired clay
6.5 x 5.25 x 2.5 cm
IA8.505 (AT 132)

The tablet is written in a western dialect of Akkadian and lists the names of hapiru-troops from various localities:

Armored hapiru-troops from Amnasse:
Azia from Ammia, Ilaia from Husarrum, Bentiya-Addu from Emar, Sumana from Naataki, Zambuqa from Atutamme, Japwa from Kurat, Matteya from Zalhe, Sarniya, citizen of Kenani, Dakuya from Qadume, Zak’a alla from Kurat, Amsusse from Armatte, Uira from Zarahe, Ehlumenni, son of Addu-Belu, Titikku from Numahhe, Zak-Assar from Amel-Zur, Addu-Belu son of Kitti, Abarandu son of Summar, Arip-Istar a hapiru, Kiriya-Dapuri, Sarnit-hama from Abzuna: 20 troops in all.

The mention of hapiru-troops is of interest as similar mentions occur in texts from all over the Near East during the second millennium BCE, yet no hapiru settlement has yet been identified. While the term has nothing to do with ‘Hebrew’, as was once thought, its actual reference remains obscure. One common theory is that hapiru were outlaws on the edge of mainstream society, and that the term refers to freebooters and social misfits. Another theory is that the term simply denotes mercenary soldiers. While the latter view would fit the above text, other references seem to favour the alternative theory.

The amount of information packed on to this small tablet demonstrates efficiency in the keeping of records. The cuneiform script was fully developed by this time.

Cuneiform tablet from the Assyrian capital city: a property transaction

Nimrud (Governor’s Palace, Room E), c. 800 BCE
fired clay, 11.3 x 7.5 x 2.2 cm
IA5.046 (ND 204)

The tablet is written in the language of Assyria and records a land transaction:

Instead of their seals their nail-marks [they have set] Hubuskayya and Abi-ul-idi sons of Samas-se-…
[fingernail marks]
A 40 imer plot of cultivated land a plot in addition to the plantation by the village of Salimani for 2 mana of silver [and] 1 mana of copper Isid-Istar has purchased.
In the presence of Hubuskayya; in the presence of Abi-ul-idi.
The money has been paid in full; the field has been purchased and taken over. There shall be no reversal or lawsuit.
In the future neither Hubuskayya nor Abi-ul-idi, nor their sons, who may raise a legal claim from Isid-Istar or his son, shall prevail.

The mention of a standard exclusion clause preventing litigation. The text reveals the existence of a legal tradition associated with land ownership that is nearly 3,000 years old. Note the standard exclusion clauses preventing litigation. An imer was the area sown by an ass-load of seed, approximately 1.8 hectares, and a mana was a unit of weight, equivalent to 60 shekels, in modern equivalent about 500 grams.

Possession of a seal was a mark of status, and if one did not own a seal, he would attest a transaction by indenting the tablet with his fingernail as in this instance.
## 6 Cuneiform cone from Sumer: to establish title

**Isin, c. 1930 BCE**

| Fired Clay | 5 cm (diam.), 13 cm (length) | IA7.817 |

The text is in the Akkadian language and reads:

Lipit-Istar, the reverent Shepherd of Nippur, the true farmer of Ur, the one who never ceases on behalf of Eridu, the high priest fit for Uruk, the king of Isin, the king of the land of Sumer and Akkad, the one chosen in the heart of Inanna am i. When I established justice in the land of Sumer and Akkad, along a canal, a great palace of the gods, the house of justice i built. Cones such as this were often pushed into the mud-brick walls of buildings, where they would confer authority or prestige on the building and its owner.

The Isin dynasty, to which Lipit-Istar belonged (c. 1934–24 BCE), introduced a new range of titles, i.e. ‘who care for Ur, Nippur, Eridu, Uruk, and Isin, the cities which these kings rebuilt’. They also wanted to be seen in continuity with the kings of the famed Ur III dynasty, the last flower of Sumerian civilization, hence the title ‘king of Sumer and Akkad’. Lipit-Istar’s name is also connected with a law ‘Code’ of which we still have forty-three clauses.

## 7 Cuneiform barrel of King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon (restored): a record of royal achievements

**Babylon, c. 550 BCE**

| Fired Clay and Plaster | 10 cm (diam.), 13.5 cm (length) | IA11.309 |

This fragmentary inscription demonstrates the longevity of the cuneiform script and records Nebuchadrezzar’s restoration of the temples of Etemenanki and Esagila, with a consequent recital of his piety in regard to the gods of Babylon, principally Ea and Marduk, whom he re-established on their pedestals. Further down, it also appears to refer to the ritual of carrying the basket of earth for the first brick. The text records Nebuchadrezzar’s conquests and claims of sovereignty over Arslana (modern Kirkuk), Assur, Akkad, Hatti, and all lands ‘from the upper sea of the setting sun to the lower sea of the rising sun’. The inscription concludes with a curse on anyone who destroys what he has built, and a prayer that his kingdom will endure forever.

Etemenanki was the prominent staged tower, or ziggurat, to the north of the Esagila enclosure (see Cat. no. 9), and was often associated with the biblical Tower of Babel. Its original construction was in Sumerian times, c. 2000 BCE.
Inscribed brick of King Shalmaneser III: a claim to greatness

Nimrud, c. 830 BCE
baked clay
36 x 36 x 10 cm
IA5.032

In the Akkadian language of Assyria, the inscription reads:
Shalmaneser, the great king, strong king, king of the world, king of Assyria, son of Assur-nasir-pal, the great king, strong king, king of the world, king of Assyria, son of Tukulti-Ninurta, king of the world, king of Assyria. Construction of the ziggurat of Kalhu [Nimrud].

The ziggurat at Nimrud, the Assyrian capital city, at about 60 metres high was the most prominent building in the city, and its remains continue to dominate the locality. It was attached to the temple of the god Ninurta, which was completed by Shalmaneser III.
The outer face of the ziggurat was built from baked bricks such as this, each one inscribed. In this case the writing was literally on the wall and anyone near the ziggurat would have seen nothing but Shalmaneser’s claims to greatness. While the population was not able to read cuneiform generally, they were no doubt familiar with the written name of the King.

Inscribed brick of King Nebuchadrezzar: royal propaganda

Babylon, c. 590 BCE
baked clay
20 x 20 x 7.5 cm (irreg.)
IA6.800

The text reads: Nabû-kudurri-usur, king of Babylon, the one who provides for Esagila and Ezida, the first among the sons of Nabû-apla-usur, king of Babylon:

Esagila, ‘Lofty house’, was the dwelling-place of Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon, and its foremost temple. A square of 500 metres on each side enclosed the temple, and, although it was constructed at least 1,600 years earlier, it was Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon who rebuilt the temple to its foremost glory.

Ezida, ‘Righteous house’, was the temple of the god Nabû, god of the scribal art and of wisdom. His main temple was at Borsippa, south of Babylon.

Egyptian stela with hieroglyphs and demotic: to seek the god’s favour

Egypt, Ptolemaic period
limestone
42 x 26 x 9 cm
IA15.200

The hieroglyphic inscription above Osiris reads (right to left): ‘Osiris Wennefer who is in Busiris, foremost of the west, lord of Abydos.’
The inscription over the man reads (left to right): ‘The Osiris, ordinary priest of Wennefer, Paenmaty, justified, born of Tadiu.’
Under the winged sun-disk, representing Horus of Edfu, is a scene showing a male with close-cropped hair, wearing a long pleated garment and sandals, standing with both arms raised in worship before a seated figure of the god Osiris. Osiris wears the Atef-crown and holds a was-sceptre (indicating power and dominion) combined with an ankhsign (signifying life) and Djed-pillar (stability, endurance). Between the two figures is an offering stand with a libation jar, over which is draped a bouquet of lotus flowers.
The demotic inscription under the main register reads: ‘Osiris Wennefer, son of Paem-ta-ala, born of Tutu’ (a translation from hieroglyphs into the script read by the Egyptians of the time).
11 Ushabti: instructions for the after-life

Egypt, Late period (Twenty-fifth Dynasty)
Faience, 19 x 5 x 3 cm
IA1.981

Ushabtis were buried with people to represent workers who would perform tasks for the deceased. This ushabti is typical of those produced in the Late period and is inscribed for a man called Pa-di-Hor-Mehen. The text also includes the name of the mother. The text states: ‘Illuminate the Osiris Pa-di-Hor-Mehen born of [mother’s name].’

12 Demotic ostracon: a record of daily work

Egypt, Ptolemaic period
Fired clay
29 x 22 x 13.5 cm (irreg.)
IA1.982

This ostracon is an account written in demotic script and can be dated, on the basis of the script, to the mid-Ptolemaic period. Demotic was the script used to write the Egyptian language from about the fifth century BCE. Hieroglyphs, which had been used for 2,500 years, also continued to be used, but hieratic (see Cat. no. 16) became less common. The ostracon does not state what it is listing. There are two columns of numbered entries, and the numbers run without a break: 1, 2, 3 ... up to 23. Against each of these is a number, which varies, but is of the order of the high 400s to the low 500s, and is a ‘round figure’ (i.e. mostly rounded to the nearest ten, with just a few figures ending in 5 or 5½).

13 Coptic ostracon: requisition of supplies

Egypt, seventh century
Fired clay
9 x 7 x 1.2 cm (irreg.)
IA17.112

This ostracon has a message in Coptic script saying that the bearer, has authority to go and fetch 1½ sacks of wheat from the farm of Letanori(?). By Poy son of Kelkelet(?) which amounts to 10 arabs (dated) 12th (year) of the month of Phaophi in the 5th Indiction. 20th [delivery of the day].

The ostracon is one of a set held by the Institute of Archaeology and relates to the management of a monastery’s land leased to tenants. Another set is in the Louvre Museum. The Institute’s ostraca relate to the monastery of Baouit, which was near modern Assuit in Middle Egypt.

Coptic is the script of the Egyptian language in the Christian period. It has the same characters as the Greek alphabet plus five additional letters for sounds not known in the Greek. One of these is a backward ‘s’.

14 Cursing bowl with Aramaic script from Jerusalem: invectives against one’s enemies

Jerusalem, second century BCE
Fired clay
6 x 16 x 16 cm
IA15.301

The Aramaic script used in the bowl developed from Phoenician, the first known alphabetic script. Aramaic became the most common language in the Eastern Mediterranean between 1,000 and 500 BCE and was eventually adopted as the lingua franca of the Persian Empire. The Aramaic script is known today for writing the Hebrew language, something that began in about 500 BCE.

The bowl has written upon it many magic spells to be made against one’s enemies. Incense may have been put in the bowl when it was used. A figure with hands on head may be seen at the bottom of the bowl.

15 Arabic ostracon: the praise of God

Egypt, eighth century
Fired clay
3 x 4 x 1.2 cm (irreg.)
IA1.2501

Ostraca are fragments of pottery that were written upon. They provided a cheap and accessible medium for writing. The Arabic script is beautifully written on this fragment of pottery and reads: ‘Allah, let him be praised ... plants’, indicating that the writer may have been paying homage to God for the harvest. The Arabic script developed from the Aramaic script (see Cat. no. 14). This is a very early example of the script.

16 Hieratic texts on mummy wrapping: protection in death

Egypt, Ptolemaic-Roman period
Linen
9 x 26 cm (irreg.)
IA17.125

Hieratic was the handwriting for the Egyptian language from the early third millennium BCE until the last half of the first millennium. It was contemporary with hieroglyphs.

The text is typical for these mummy bandage texts, and is probably from the Book of the Dead. The illustration is also typical and represents the adornment in front of the four sons of Horus: the baboon-headed figure, Hapy, the falcon-headed Khasekhonsu, the jackal-headed Ouamutef, and the human-headed Imsety.

The inscribed linen bandages are known from the Twenty-sixth Dynasty down into the Ptolemaic-Roman period.

17 Coptic parchment of the New Testament: a religious text

Egypt, fifth to sixth century
Papyrus
5.5 x 9.1 cm (irreg.)
IA1.599

The printing of religious documents has been a major purpose for writing. This parchment is a fragment from a manuscript of the Apostle Paul’s letter to Timothy, advising him that local church leaders, deacons, should not drink too much wine (1 Timothy 3:8–10). The script is Coptic and the language is the Sahidic dialect of Coptic. It is thought that the text comes from the White Monastery, which was near Sohag in Upper Egypt.

The decoration around religious texts became increasingly ornate. People who devoted their lives to the task of copying the Bible prepared these manuscripts.

18 Greek papyrus: a private letter

Egypt, fifth to sixth century
Papyrus
5.5 x 9.1 cm (irreg.)
IA1.599

The fragmentary papyrus text is a private letter, written in a careless hand, which deals with some official business between two people of unequal standing. It appears to be a receipt for something not referred to in the fragment. Included in the text is the phrase kaiosan vraioukariai (Caesar, most loyal), which would have been followed by the date.
A comparison of alphabetic scripts illustrating the relationship all share with Phoenician

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The Arabic, Greek and Coptic lists are incomplete