Early writing

In many respects, the world is now organised around writing. As the form of communication we currently employ, writing 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 that 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 corner-stone of civilisation.

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 wearies the body' (Ecclesiastes 12:12). He would be lost for words today.

The Australian Institute of Archaeology

The Australian Institute of Archaeology has a collection of objects that illustrate early writing in Egypt and Mesopotamia. This material was acquired 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). 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 and 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.

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