

# A History of Writing



one of the earliest examples of writing, a 4th millennium tablet from Uruk, lists sacks of grain and heads of cattle

The earliest writing seems to be an accounting device to record inventory.

Clay tokens were used for this purpose in the Mediterranean as early as 8000 BCE and were common by 4000 BCE.

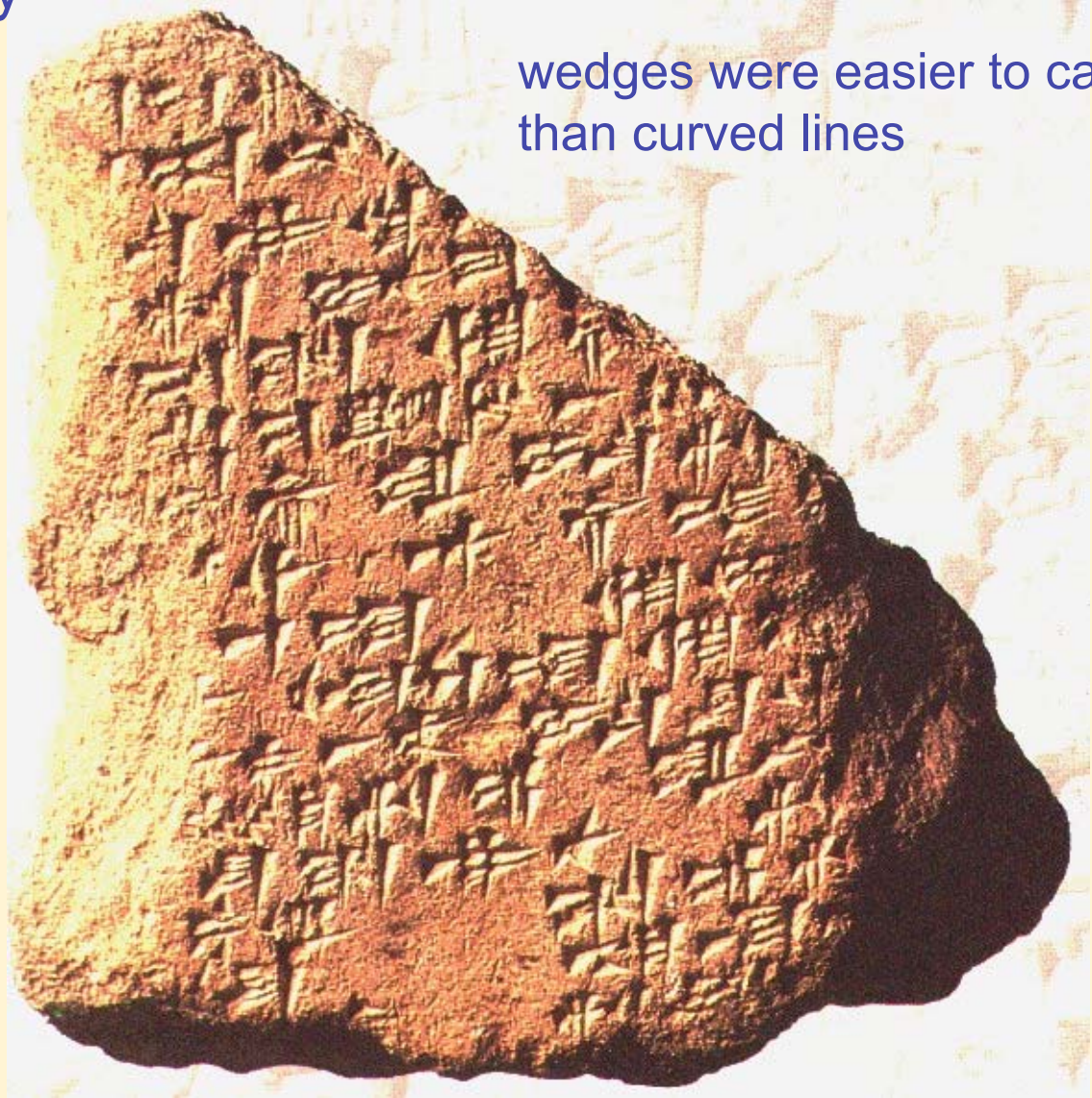


Clay tablets from Sumer, c. 3200 BCE, show early pictographic writing, which later became wedge-shaped cuneiform . . .





Cuneiform, literally  
'wedge-shaped'  
writing on baked  
clay tablets,  
was first used ca.  
3000 BCE in  
Mesopotamia



wedges were easier to carve  
than curved lines

Writing was invented multiple times in many places on earth . . .

the earliest Chinese writing was “oracle bone” script, inscribed on tortoise shell or ox bone during the Shang Dynasty, ca. 1600 - 1000 BCE.

priests burned the shell or bone, then read the cracks as good or bad omens

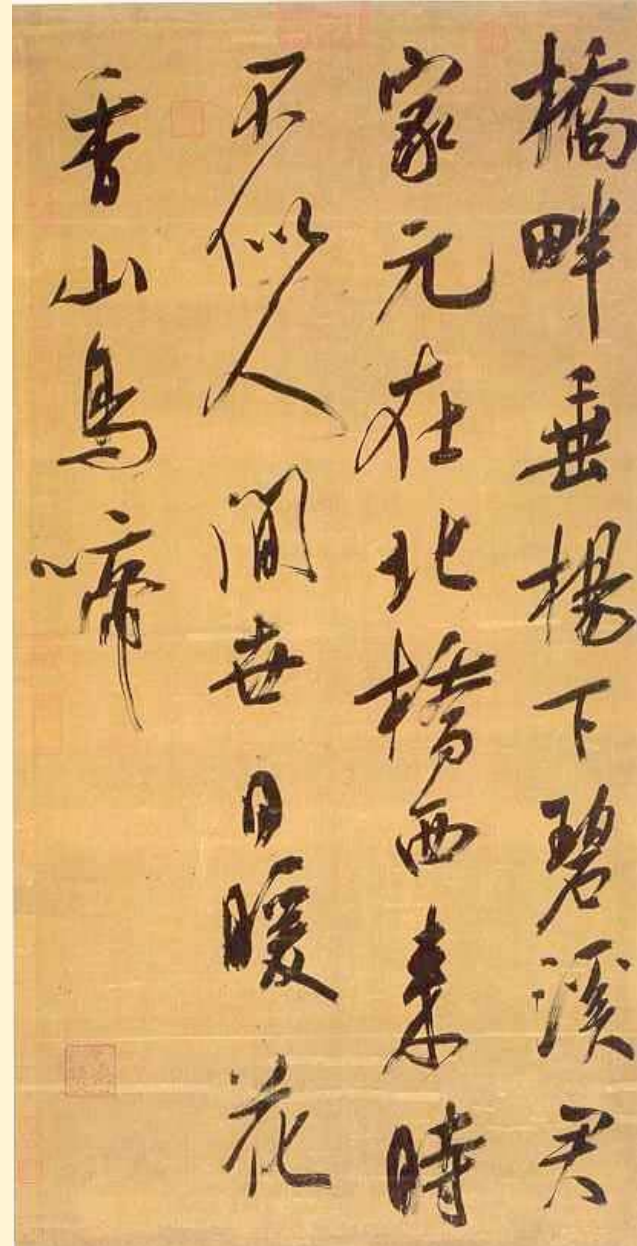




This Chinese calligraphic poem is written on silk and dates from the Song dynasty, 900 - 1279 CE

by this time, Chinese writing has clearly become ideographic rather than pictographic

Taipei Museum



Chinese characters are sometimes simplified --

traditional characters  
still used in Taiwan  
and elsewhere

中國行

simplified  
version, used  
for Mandarin

中国行

Another pictographic writing system developed in meso-America.

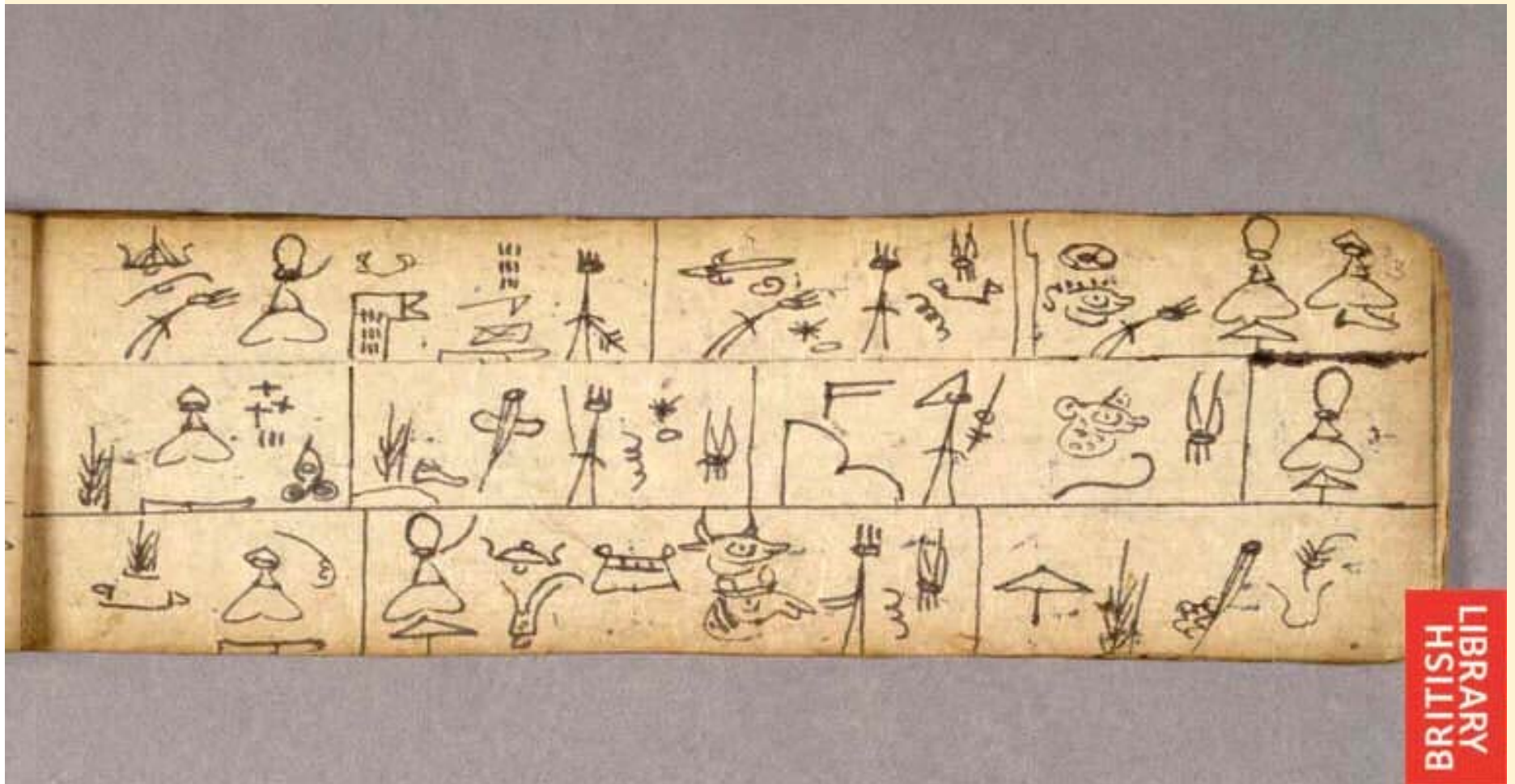
The Dresden Codex is one of four surviving pre-Columbian Mayan manuscripts.

The script, recently deciphered, uses symbols that stand for sounds and whole words.





The Noso or Naxi live in Yunnan province, in China, and use a pictographic writing system as a mnemonic for priests. 19th c.



## The Egyptian Book of the Dead --

-- the hieroglyphs, which contain both semantic and phonetic information, read, "the great god, foremost of the west, that he may give a good burial to the god's father of Amun-Re, king of gods, Pawiaenadja, true of voice.

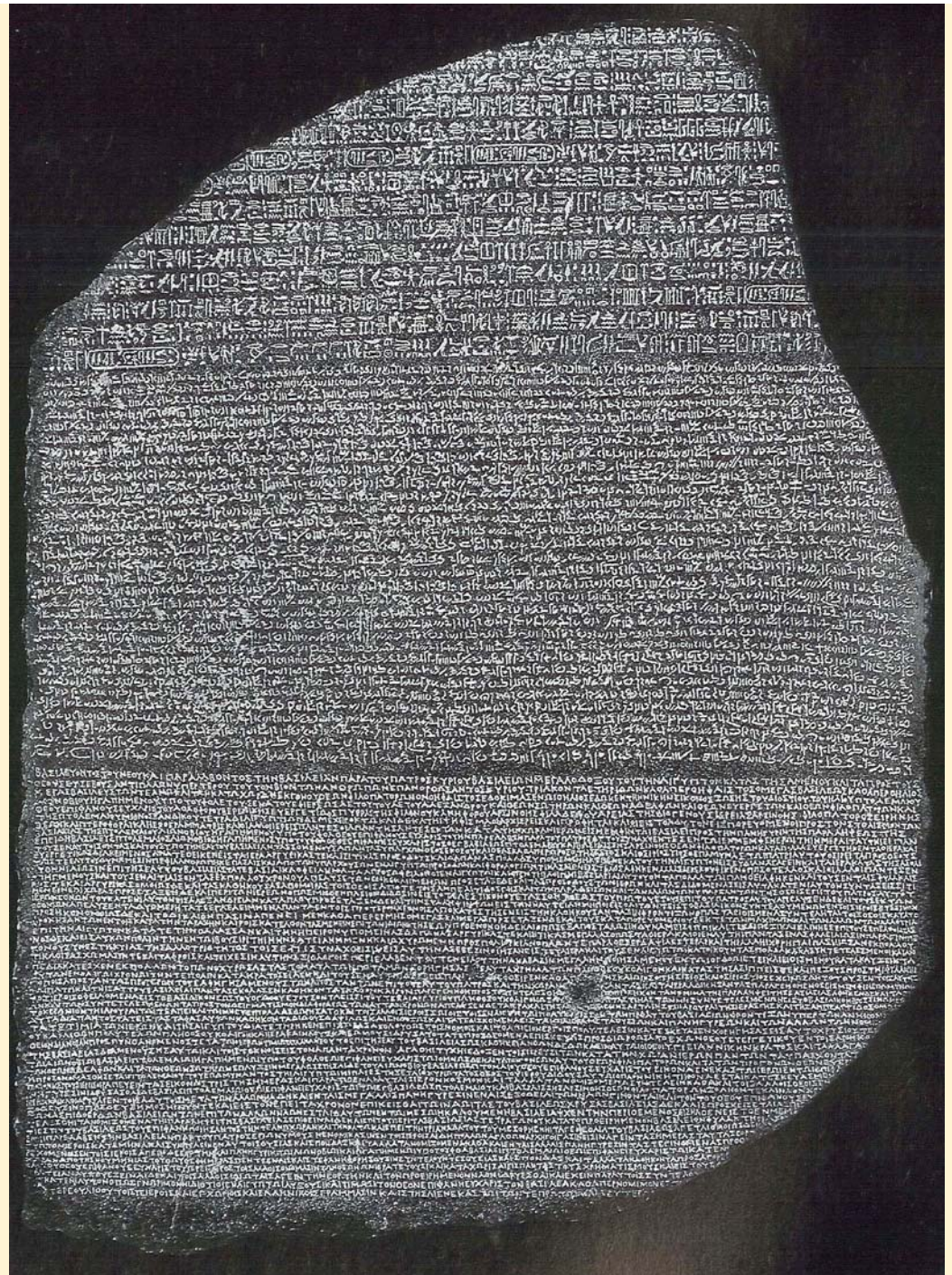
The arrow points to an apparent "scribo"





The Rosetta Stone  
was carved around  
290 BCE and was  
discovered in 1799;

it contains 3 scripts:  
hieroglyphic, demotic  
Egyptian, and Greek





The Cascajal Stone, found in Veracruz, Mexico, contains a 3,000-year-old, previously unknown script, making it the oldest writing in the Western hemisphere.

It is probably Olmec in origin and pushes New World writing back to ca. 900 BCE.

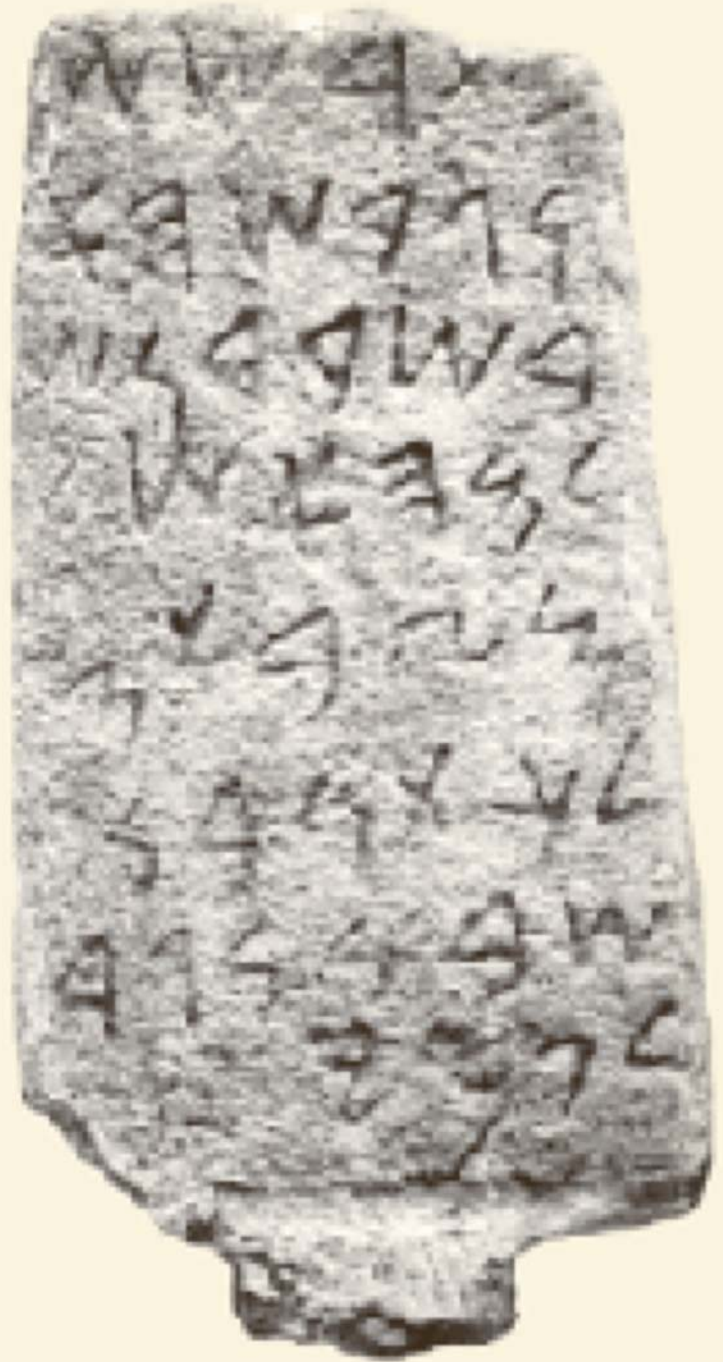
Some of the 62 signs on the stone slab are repeated and none have been deciphered.

The stone measures 14 x 8 inches, is about 5" thick, and weighs 26 lbs.

The last discovery of an unknown writing system occurred in 1924 in the Indus Valley.



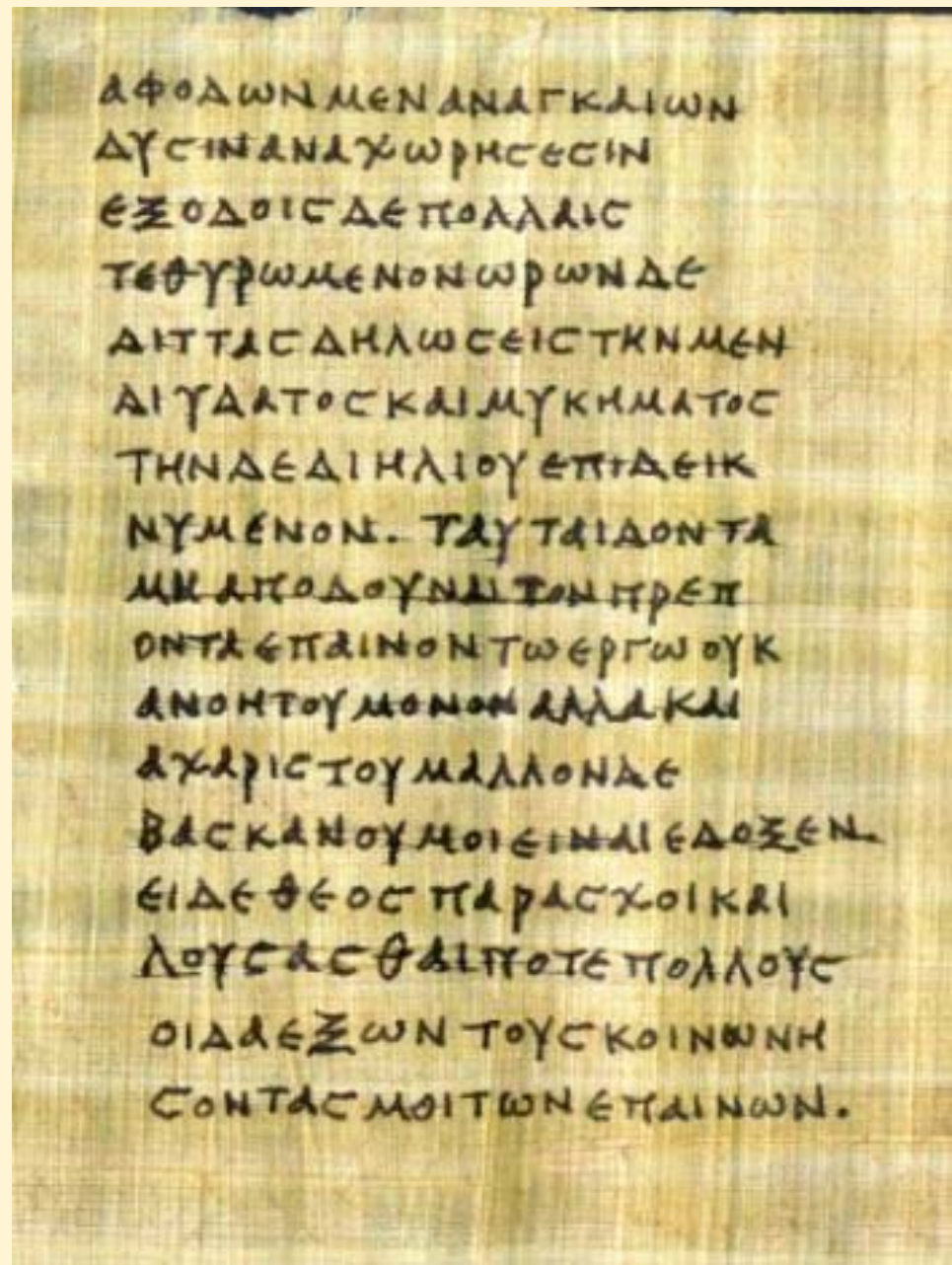
Phoenician writing  
emerges ca. 1200 BCE;  
all 22 symbols were  
consonants -- the vowels  
weren't written





Archaic Greek writing  
adapts Phoenician  
script, c. 750 - 500 BCE

is the Greek alphabet a major  
development, or a minor  
improvement on an older  
form of writing?

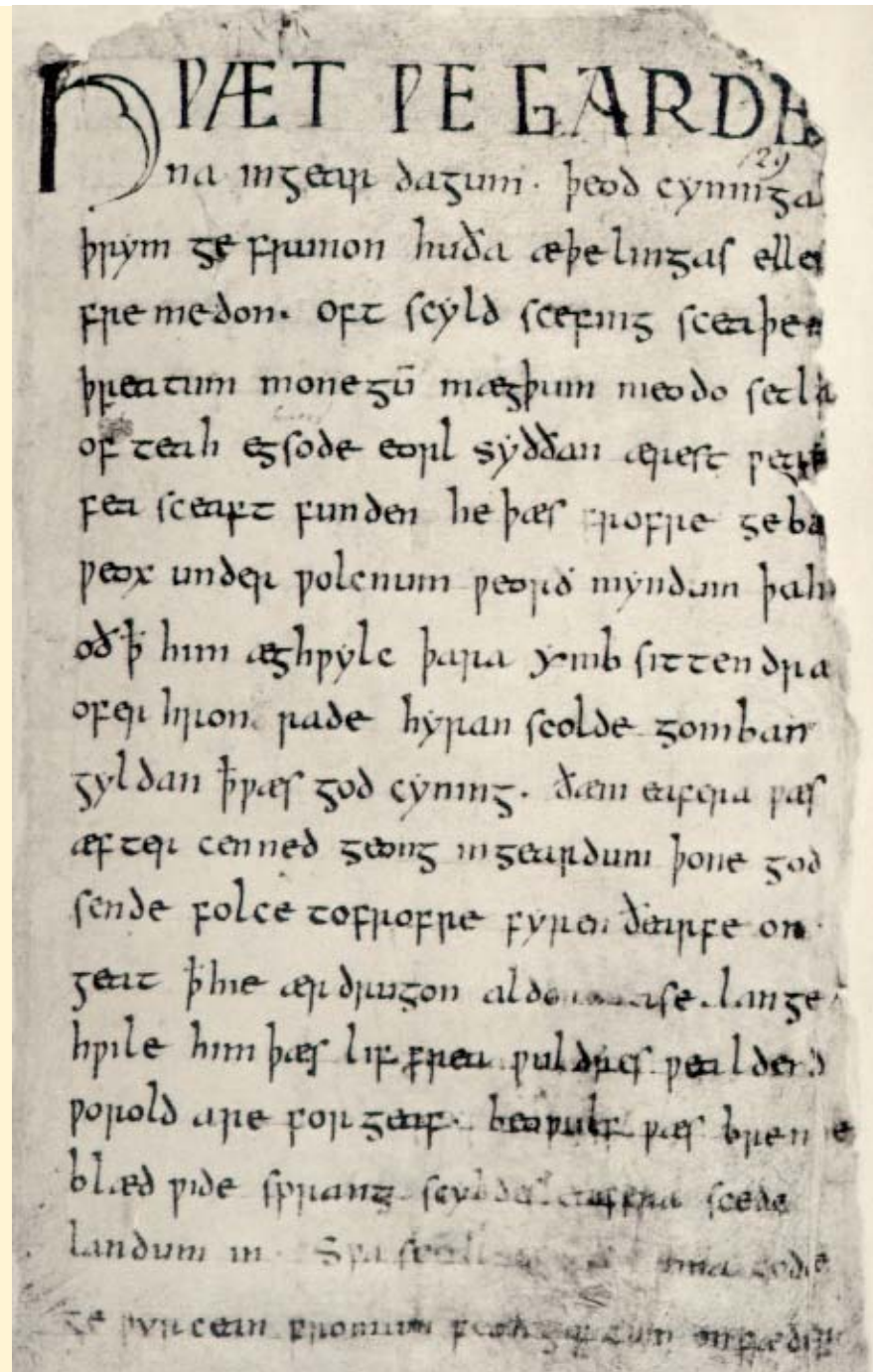





The first page of the  
Beowulf manuscript.

The poem was composed  
between 680 and 800 CE,  
and the ms. dates from the  
10th or 11th c.

The sole copy was damaged  
in a fire in the late 18th c.



The futhorc is a runic system used in Anglo-Saxon England and parts of Europe, mainly for inscriptions

							
f	u	þ	a	r	k	g	w
fehu	ūruz	þurisaz	ansuz	raipō	kaunaz	gebō	wunjō
wealth	aurochs	giant	god	riding	ulcer	gift	joy
							
h	n	i	j	ī	p	z	s
hagalaz	naupiz	isa	jera	eihwaz	perþ	algiz	sōwulō
hail	need/hardship	ice	year/harvest	yew tree	luck	sedge (?)	sun
							
t	b	e	m	l	ng	d	o
teiwaz	berkana	ehwaz	mannaz	laguz	inguz	ḏagaz	ōpila
the god Tyr	birch twig	horse	man	water	the god Ing	day	inherited land

The Franks Casket, dating from the 7th or 8th century, is inscribed with runes as well as illustrations





In the 15th c., King Sejong commissioned a group of scholars to create a Korean alphabet, now called Hangeul, to free Korea of the influence of Chinese writing.



The earliest Japanese writing, dating from the 8th c., and perhaps as early as the 6th c., is called manyogana and uses Chinese characters (right column) to represent Japanese phonetic values (left column).

the character segment  
in red was adapted to  
form the katakana on  
the left

ア	阿	イ	伊	ウ	宇	エ	江	オ	於
カ	加	キ	幾	ク	久	ケ	介	コ	己
サ	散	シ	之	ス	須	セ	世	ソ	曾
タ	多	チ	千	ツ	川	テ	天	ト	止
ナ	奈	ニ	仁	ヌ	奴	ネ	祢	ノ	乃
ハ	八	ヒ	比	フ	不	ヘ	部	ホ	保
マ	末	ミ	三	ム	牟	メ	女	モ	毛
ヤ	也			ユ	由			ヨ	與
ラ	良	リ	利	ル	流	レ	礼	ロ	呂
ワ	和							ヲ	乎
ン	尔								



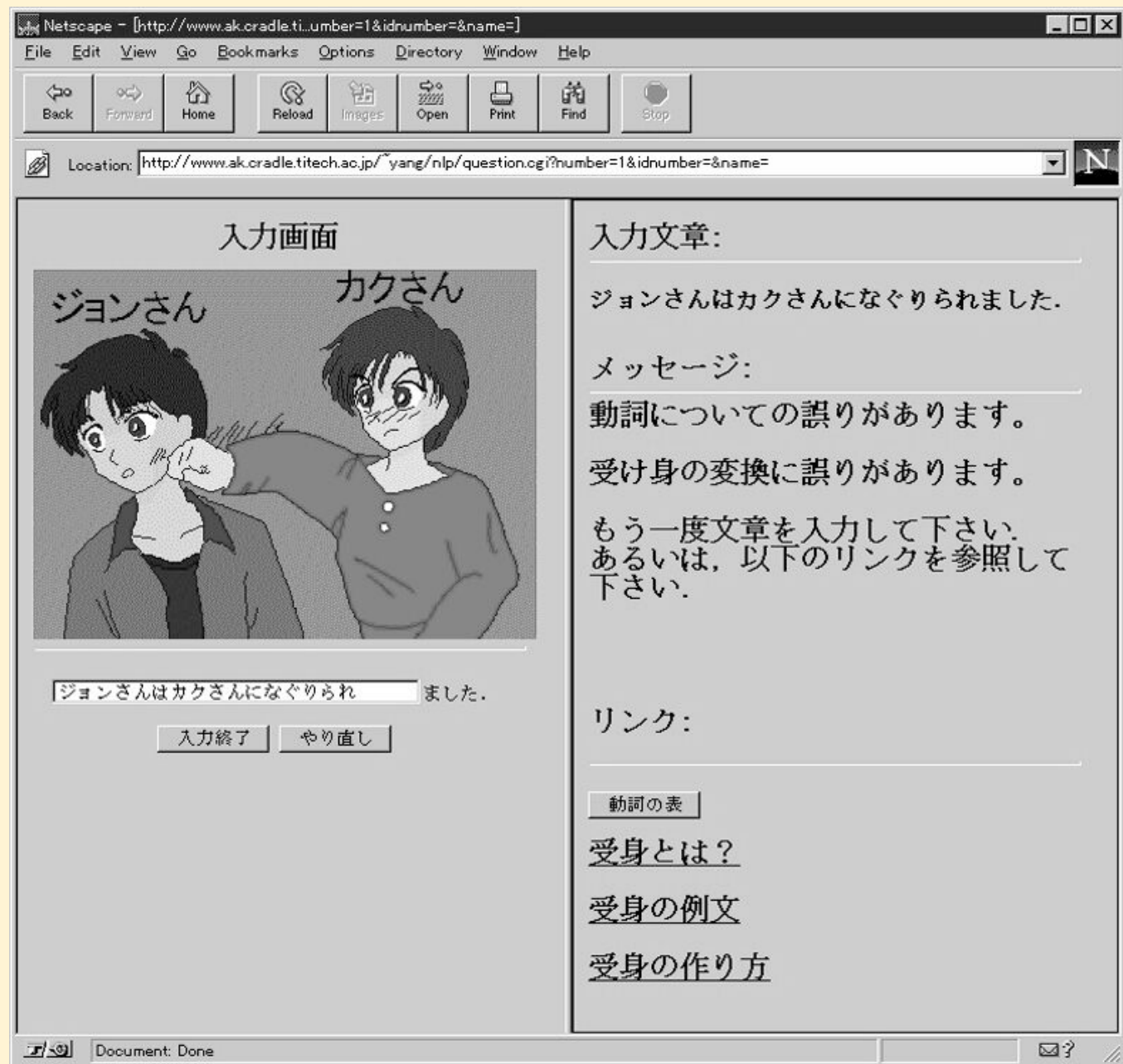
# Today, Japanese uses four different writing systems:

romaji, Roman letters representing Japanese sounds

hiragana, ordinary syllabic script;

katakana, which derives from Chinese characters, and is used for writing non-Chinese loan words;

and kanji, Chinese characters used to represent Japanese words



Devanagari script was first developed to write Sanskrit in the 12th c. CE, and is now used for Hindi and other South Asian languages

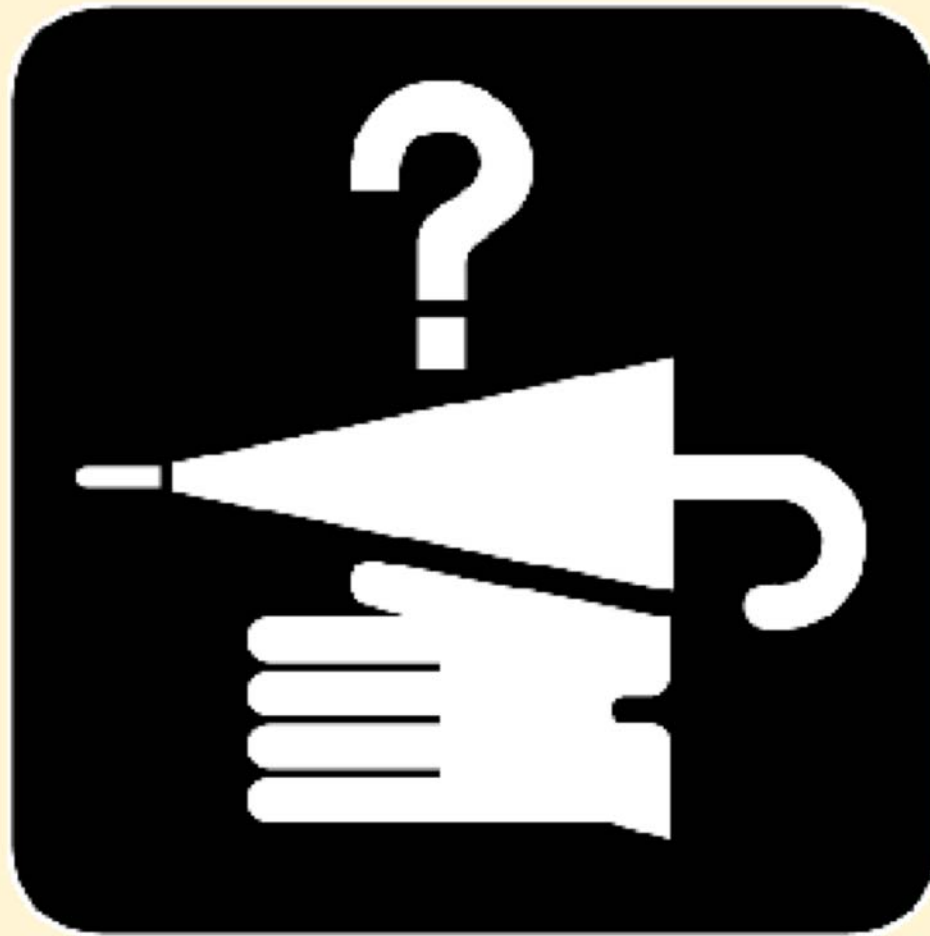




Pictographs still play an important  
role in our communication  
practices:



Not all pictographs  
are immediately  
comprehensible





Not just signs, but puzzles as well:



Here's a patriotic  
letter in the form  
of a rebus

 America.

My Daughter hold without fear  
Strongly resist Duty in doing  
the good long intended for Happiness  
told that I have given away and have sent  
5<sup>th</sup> the set of my own put in rights &  
I have been them as and as they say  
they have not let me give all things  
only require so a good discharge of War  
re against or rely upon me to  
as to French Power shall tell him we  
on an enemy between us and  
the takes care of her.  
I'll send her such Masses from my pen as I might  
repent to know to a good or all to merit  
a letter. NB let us take much hold of V.

I am your friend &c.



**arrest  
you're**

**V A D E R S**



but others become  
an integral part  
of our writing  
system

:) &#x26;#x25;sΣ∞ ♪ ☺©



Writing is decoration  
as well as communication

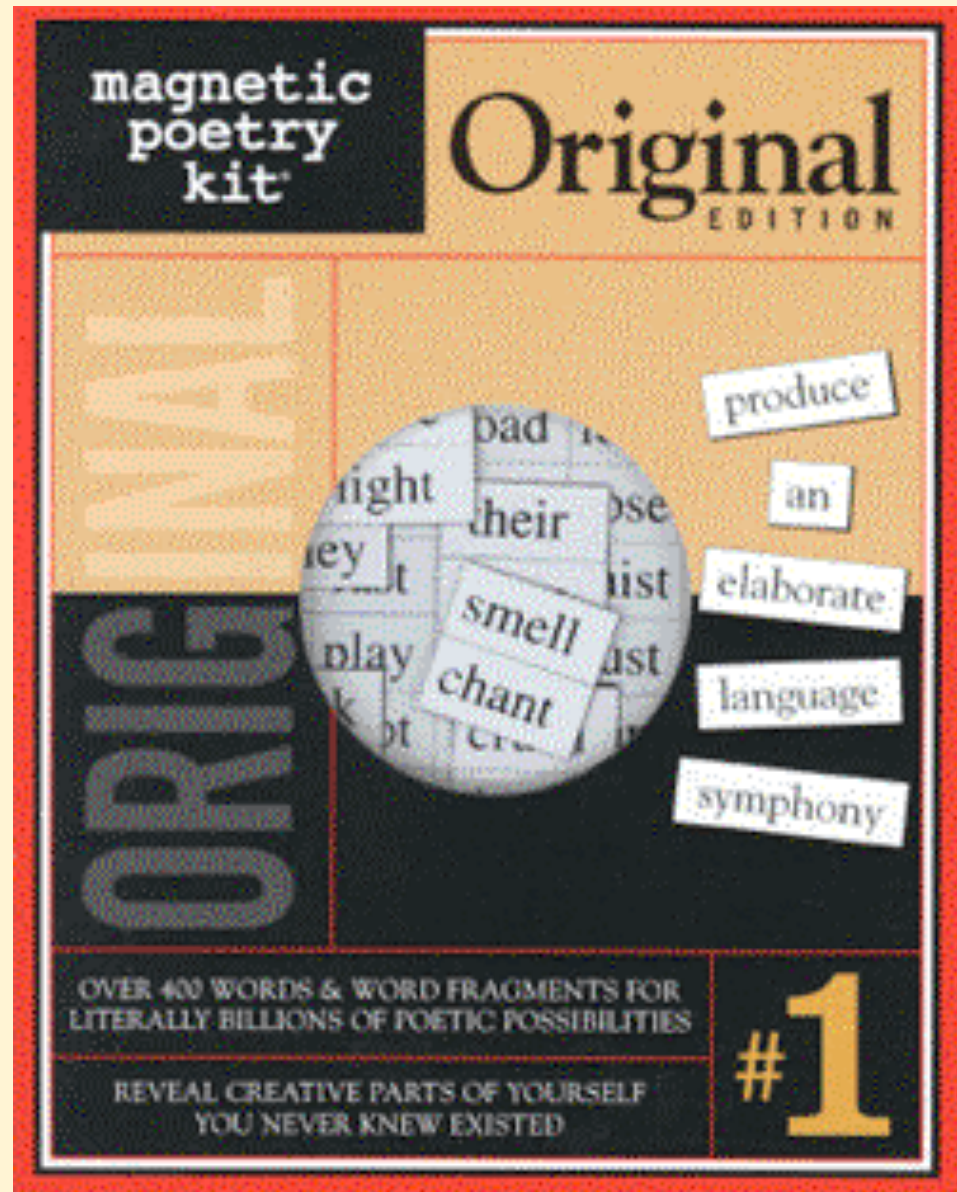


There are all sorts of writing systems in use today . . .





Magnetic writing  
isn't just for kids . . .



it can also be for  
consenting  
adults.

