

Write like an Assyrian

The Assyrians wrote on clay tablets in a wedge-shaped script, now called **cuneiform**.

Cuneiform signs are made up of individual triangular impressions of a reed stylus ("**wedges**"), which are imprinted into moist clay. Each sign is pressed into the clay according to well-defined conventions. Signs are combined to make words and sentences, but normally without word-spacing or punctuation.

Cuneiform script is more complex than modern alphabets and was very difficult to learn. It consists of **hundreds of characters** representing words and syllables.

In the 7th century BC the Assyrians used the script to write in **Akkadian, a semitic language** in the same family as Hebrew and Arabic. By this time though, cuneiform writing was already 2500 years old. It was originally used for writing a completely different language: **Sumerian**, which has no known linguistic relatives.

Like modern letters, Assyrian royal correspondence was often enclosed inside **envelopes** – but Assyrian envelopes were made out of a thin layer of clay. This was sealed and authenticated with the sender's seal. Very few envelopes have survived, as the envelope had to be removed in order to read the letter – similar to cracking a walnut!

Clay was not the only writing medium available to Assyrian scribes. Cuneiform inscriptions were also **carved across stone panels**, such as the inscription of king Assurnasirpal II. Stone panels bearing images of winged genies, from Assurnasirpal II's palace in the city of Kalhu, are now held in museum collections across the world.

Find out more at: <http://oracc.org/saao/knpp/cuneiformrevealed>



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Assyrian scribe recording the spoils of war on a clay tablet. (728BC).

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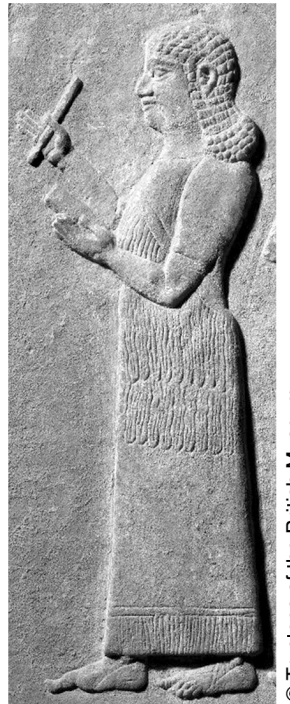
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