

# 5000 YEARS OF WRITING

TEXT  
BY VIVIANO DOMENICI  
PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY C.S.R.L. ARCHIVE,  
INTERSTUDIO







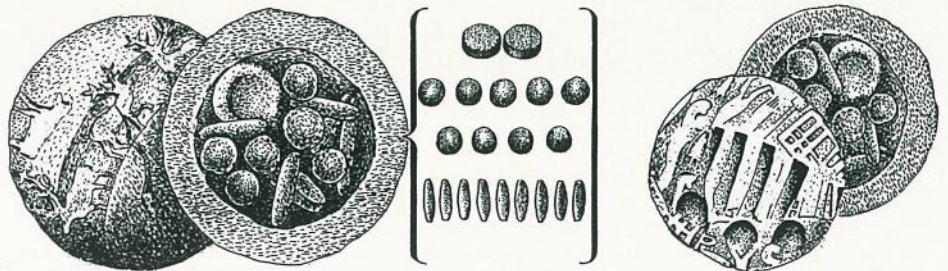


*Nelle pagine precedenti, testa di mazza rituale sumera (2100 a.C.) con iscrizione : "A Ninshubur da Enu'a, lo scriba".*

*Previous pages, the head of a ritual Sumerian sceptre (2100 BC) with the inscription: 'To Ninshubur from Enu'a, the scribe'.*

Amongst all the usual kinds of celebrations for ten, a hundred or five hundred years of various events, the anniversary of one of the greatest human inventions seems about to pass unnoticed: around the year 3,000 BC, for the first time, man began to write thanks to an invention by the Sumerians in southern Mesopotamia. The anniversary of the invention of writing coincides with some surprising news, however: terracotta tablets with pictographic signs found in Romania in 1961, have now definitely been identified as Sumerian and were made 4,900 years ago with clay from the 'Land between the two Rivers'. This means that just after inventing writing the Sumerians must have penetrated to the heart of Europe, since they left written evidence. This find could well change the early history of our civilization.

The exact date and the attribution of the Romanian tablets to the Sumerians have long been debated by scholars. The earliest writing in the world is attested by a series of clay 'tablets'. Dried in the sun, these tablets had engraved figures (pictograms) of animals, vegetables, men and various objects. Alongside the figures were



*Per registrare l'assegnazione di merci, un acquisto o un prestito, i popoli mesopotamici della fine del IV millennio a.C. inserivano all'interno di sfere cave d'argilla (bulle) dei "gettoni" di forme diverse con differenti valori numerici. È la prima forma di scrittura.*

*Around the end of the 4th millennium BC, to record the delivery of goods, a purchase or a loan the Mesopotamian peoples put tokens of various shapes with numerical values inside a hollow clay sphere or 'bulla'. This was the earliest form of writing.*

*Col tempo si cominciò a imprimere i gettoni all'esterno della bulla prima di chiuderli al suo interno: il contenuto era quindi leggibile senza aprire la bulla, ed essa veniva aperta solo in caso di contestazione.*

*In time the tokens were impressed on the outside of the bulla before being closed inside: the contents could thus be read without opening the bulla, which was then only broken in the case of a dispute.*



*Sotto, sigillatura apposta da uno scriba su una tavoletta (II mill. a.C.).*

*Below, a seal impressed on a tablet by a scribe (2nd millennium BC).*



small engravings with numerical values. This first form of notation was created by the Sumerians in 3,000 BC and rapidly evolved into what came to be known as 'cuneiform' writing because of its wedge-shaped signs (*cuneus* is Latin for wedge).

With the demise of the great Mesopotamian civilizations, the cuneiform was abandoned and all trace of it lost until as late as 1621, when the Italian explorer Pietro Della Valle saw and copied a number of inscriptions he had found during a visit to Persepolis in Iran. But this discovery was not followed up at the time, and it was only with the publications of accurate copies of other inscriptions that attempts were made by many European scholars to decipher the writings. Their studies revealed that the wedge-shaped signs were used to express various languages. In one text three languages were recognized: old Persian, Elamite (after a 'blind' test in which a sealed envelope was given to three different scholars) and Babylonian.

Sumerian, the oldest language of them all, however, had not yet been recognized. But as soon as its possible existence was hinted at, the experts were divided: some claimed it was an



*L'idea di imprimere i gettoni sulla bulla rese inutile il sistema stesso della bulla cava: nacquero così le prime tavolette piene con simboli impressi all'esterno.*

*The idea of impressing the tokens on the outside made the system of the hollow bulla superfluous: thus the first solid tablets with symbols impressed on the outside came into being.*



*Accanto ai valori numerici ottenuti coi gettoni di diversa forma compaiono le prime immagini (pittogrammi) delle merci trattate: brocche, schiavi, orzo....*

*Along with the numerical values obtained with the tokens of various forms the first images (pictograms) began to appear depicting the goods in questions: vases, slaves, barely...*



*Col passare dei secoli gli scribi trasformarono i pittogrammi in caratteri cuneiformi.*

*Over the centuries the pictograms were then gradually transformed into cuneiform characters.*



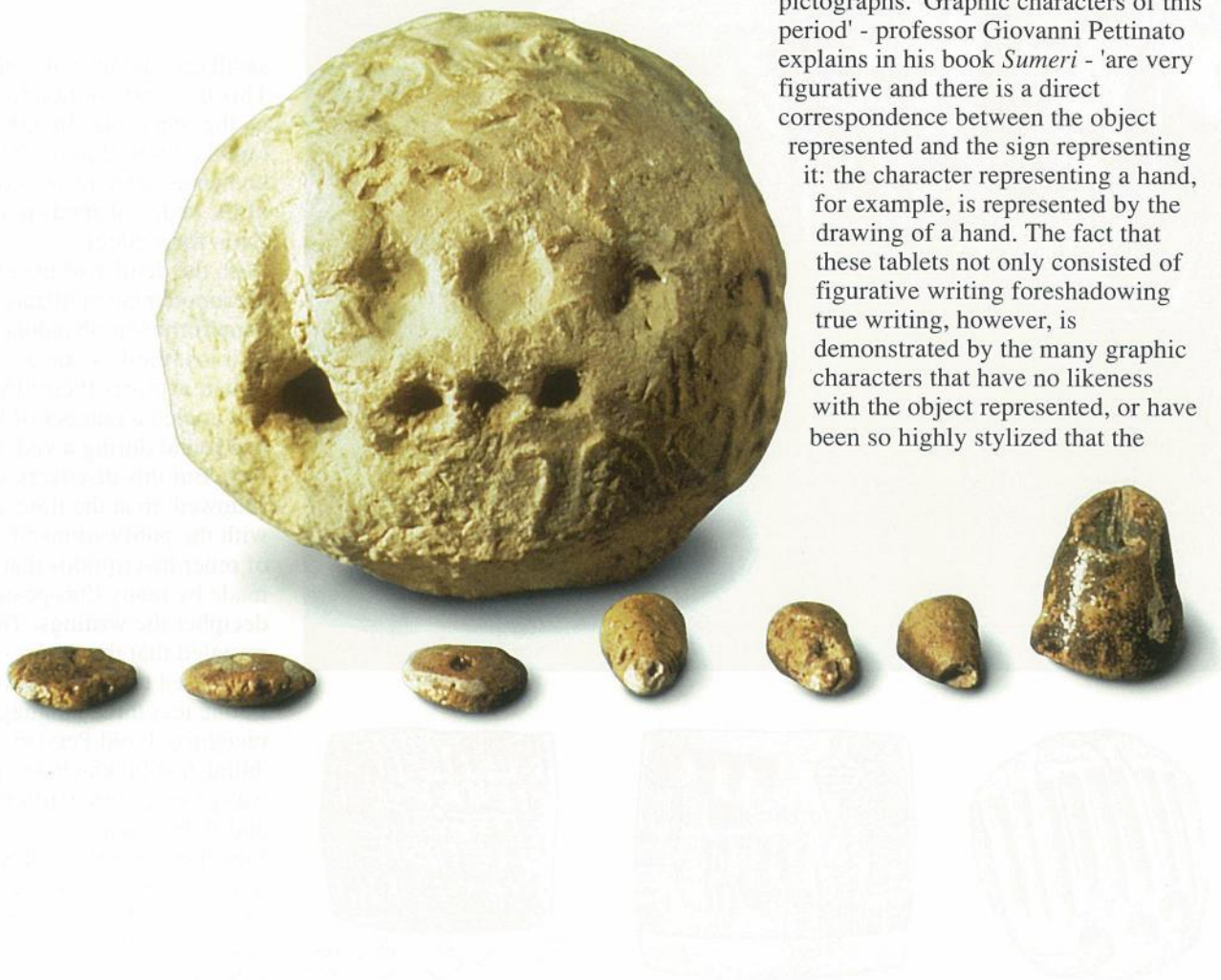
*"Busta" sferica in argilla con l'indicazione dei "contatori", sistemi di calcolo arcaici in essa contenuti. Da Susa, Iran (ca. 3.300 a.C.).*

*A spherical clay 'envelope' with inside the 'counters', ancient systems of reckoning. Susa, Iran (c. 3,300 BC).*

independent language, others a variation of Babylonian. The debate raged on for a long time, often becoming very heated - some scholars are even said to have defended their position by wielding umbrellas. After all this animosity, in 1914 the publication of the first Sumerian

dictionary seemed to settle the issue. Since then thousands of documents have been found (administrative writings, encyclopedias, manuals, dictionaries and epic poems), making it possible to outline the main features of Sumerian civilization.

But the most difficult 'writings' to interpret are those first tablets, the pictographs. 'Graphic characters of this period' - professor Giovanni Pettinato explains in his book *Sumeri* - 'are very figurative and there is a direct correspondence between the object represented and the sign representing it: the character representing a hand, for example, is represented by the drawing of a hand. The fact that these tablets not only consisted of figurative writing foreshadowing true writing, however, is demonstrated by the many graphic characters that have no likeness with the object represented, or have been so highly stylized that the



*Pagina accanto, piccola testa di mazza sferica, in onice, con iscrizione cuneiforme sumerica, dedicata al dio Shulshaga. Lagash, XXIV sec. a.C.*

*Opposite, small spherical onyx sceptre head with a cuneiform Sumerian inscription dedicated to the God Shulshaga. Lagash, 2,400 BC.*





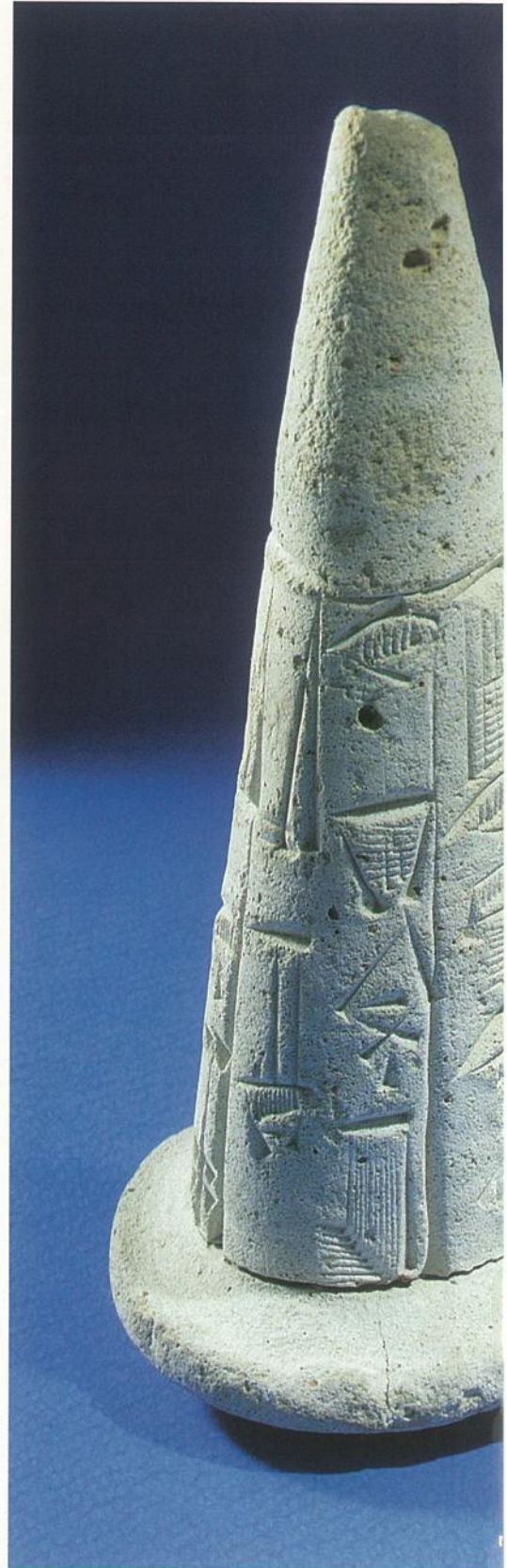


visual association with the object is no longer perceptible'.

Thus this century, despite all the difficulties, these archaic signs were beginning to reveal their meaning, and if new material were to come to light, even the first scribblings of humanity might be understood.

And it was at this point that the Romanian tablets came on the scene. In 1961 a group of archaeologists at work near Tartaria, Transylvania, discovered a burial containing some terracotta and alabaster statuettes, a puzzling anchor-shaped clay object, a shell bracelet (*Spondilus*) and fourteen tablets with engraved signs reminiscent of early Sumerian writing.

Although thirty years have elapsed since that discovery, the Romanian archaeologists





*Coni e chiodi d'argilla per le fondazioni, incisi a caratteri cuneiformi sumerici, di varie provenienze. Servivano come ex-voto nella costruzione dei templi. (Mesopotamia, III mill. a.C.).*

*Clay cones and nails for the building foundations, inscribed with Sumerian cuneiform characters from various sources. They were used as ex-votives in the construction of temples (Mesopotamia, 3rd millennium BC).*





SCHEMA DI EVOLUZIONE DEI SEGNI CUNEIFORMI  
DEVELOPMENT OF CUNEIFORM SIGNS

Date approssimative  
Approximate dates

La stella (simbolo del cielo e del dio)  
Star (sign for the sky and god)

L'apezzamento di terra  
Plot of ground

La sagoma umana (simbolo dell'uomo)  
Human shape (sign for man)

Il triangolo pubico (simbolo della donna)  
Pubic triangle (sign for woman)

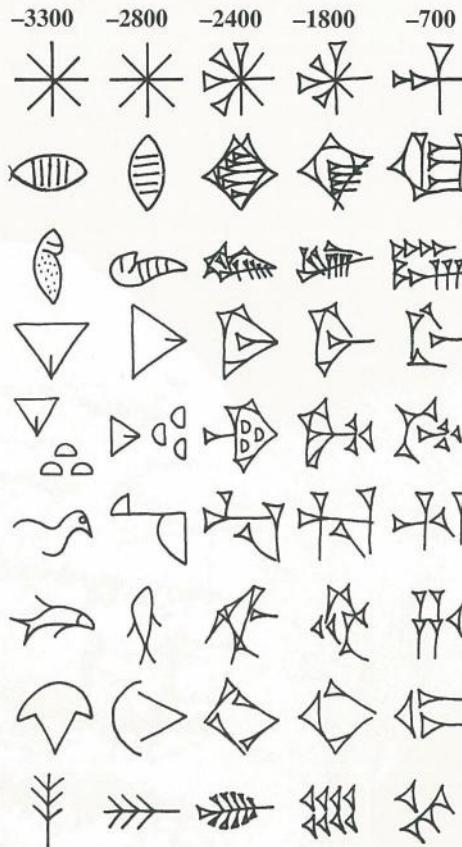
La donna + il simbolo delle montagne =  
la donna straniera, la schiava  
Woman + sign of mountains = foreign  
woman or female slave

L'uccello - Bird

Il pesce - Fish

La testa di mucca - Cow's head

La spiga d'orzo - Ear of barley



(da « Naissance de l'écriture » - Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris, 1982)

In basso, vaso in calcite di Naram-Sin, re di Akkad, in Mesopotamia, 2250 a.C.

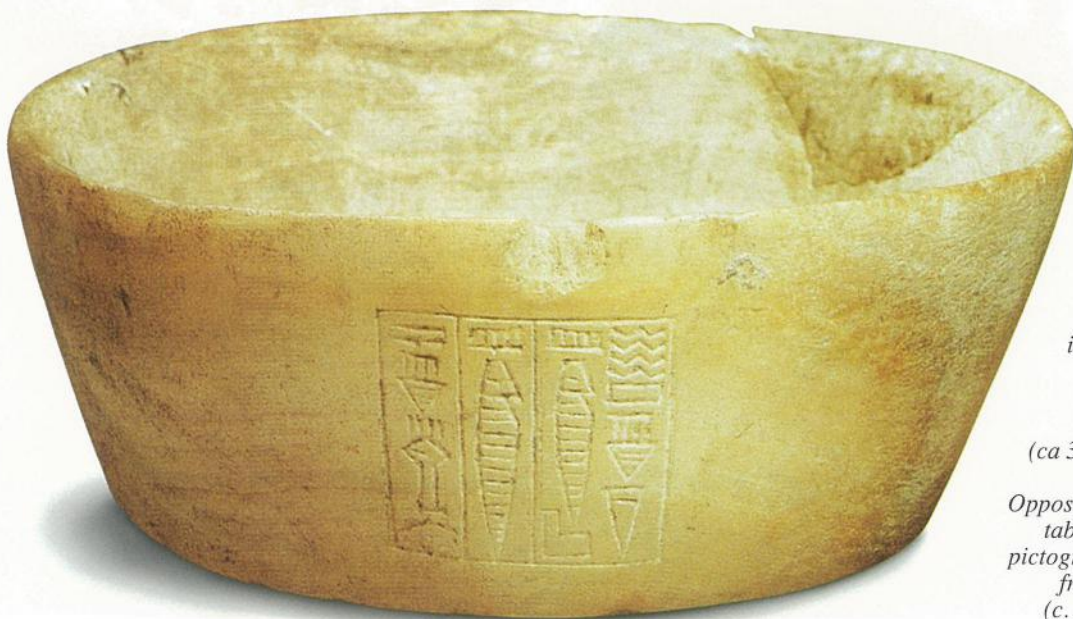
L'iscrizione dice: "Naram-Sin, Re dei 'quattro quarti', un vaso come bottino dalla terra di Magan" (Oman). Coll. Borowsky.

Below, calcite vase belonging to Naram-Sin, King of Akkad, Mesopotamia, 2,250 BC. The inscription reads: 'Naram-Sin, King of the "four fourths", a vase taken as booty from the land of Magan' (Oman). Borowsky Collection.

have still not published a scientific report of the excavation.

And added to the difficulties of exchanges due to the political situation in Romania, this has prevented an overall assessment of their findings. Thus for three decades the Tartaria 'tablets' were in limbo, far from a non-specialist public. In the meantime, however, some new both encouraging and disappointing information came to light: for conservation purposes the tablets were fired thus making it impossible to date them with the thermoluminescence method; the dates suggested by the Romanians were criticised on stratigraphic grounds; the alabaster figurines and the anchor-shaped object were found to have similar material to that used in the Aegean world in the early 3rd millennium BC, and the Romanians finally published photographs of the 'tablets' and 60 of their signs were identified.

'The study carried out by Adam Falkenstein of the University of Heidelberg' - explains professor Pettinato - 'made it possible to recognize 40 signs as being exactly identical to those from the earliest Sumerian writing. We can claim,



Pagina accanto, tavoletta quadrangolare iscritta a caratteri pittografici di provenienza Mesopotamica (ca. 3.000-2.800 a.C.).

Opposite, quadrangular tablet engraved with pictographic characters from Mesopotamia (c. 3,000-2,800 BC).







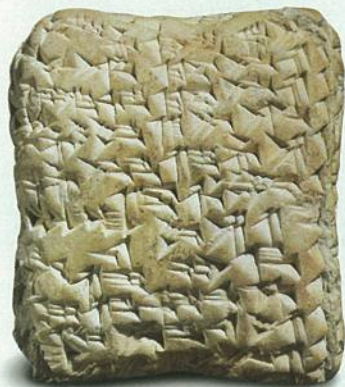
Sotto, tavolette mesopotamiche provenienti da Umma, 2050 a.C., con iscrizioni relative ad una transazione economica.

Below, Mesopotamic tablets from Umma, 2050 BC, with inscriptions concerning a commercial transaction.

Pagina accanto, tavoletta Koau Rongo Rongo in legno di toromiro recante incisi i segni attribuiti ad una forma di scrittura. (Isola di Pasqua, Fase Huri Moai - Museo di Storia Naturale di Santiago del Cile).

Opposite, a wooden Koau Rongo Rongo toromiro tablet with engraved signs considered to be a form of writing (Easter Island, Huri Moai Phase - Museo de Historia Natural, Santiago, Chili).

therefore, that these "tablets" are Sumerian and date from 2,900 BC. Moreover, the physical-chemical



analysis of the terracotta has revealed that they were not produced locally but made with clay from Mesopotamia'. We must, accept, therefore, the idea of the Sumerians in Europe in the early 3rd millennium. Previously they were thought to have crossed the Euphrates some time after 2,000 BC, and never to have reached as far as central Turkey.

Thus the eve of the five-thousandth anniversary of writing has been marked by a revolution in Sumerian studies.

#### References cited

F. Mario Fales, 1989, *Prima dell'alfabeto*, Erizzo Editrice Srl, Venezia.



One of the few undeciphered writings is finally yielding up its secrets. A New Zealand scholar, Steven Fisher, has published two articles, one in the *Journal of Polynesian* and another in the *Rapa Nui Journal*, announcing the interpretation of an inscription engraved on a wooden sceptre on Easter Island. The inscription tells of a myth of origins and makes a long list of couplings between fabulous beings, who gave life to all things in the world.

To crack the inscription, Fisher examined all of the other twenty-five existing Easter Island inscriptions (twenty-one are on the famous Rongorongo tablets, three on breast plates and one on this so-called 'Santiago sceptre'). He then focused on the inscription on the sceptre: ninety-seven vertical strokes divide the whole writing into sections, each containing a different number of glyphs. This division suggested that the inscription was a series of words or phrases. Having noted various repetitions of glyphs and a certain rhythm in some series, Fisher compared the inscription to an old Easter Island song recorded in 1886, but whose structural features date it to before contact with Europeans (the island was discovered in 1722).

Thanks to this comparative study, Fisher deduced that the inscriptions were made using a mixed system of writing (logographic and semasiographic), in which a sign may represent an object, action or phrase, like 'make love'.

Fisher noticed that each group of seven signs began with a glyph accompanied by a phallic-form suffix. This form usually reappeared with every third glyph: i.e. at 4, 7, 10 and so on.

This kind of triadic structure was also found in another two tablets and is typical of Polynesian songs about the myths of creation.

Using this 'key', confirmed by the structure of the song about a fantastic series of sexual encounters, Fisher translated a triad on the sceptre: 'All the birds made love with all the fish and the Sun was born'. For those not acquainted with the difficulties of deciphering, this may not seem much of a result. But we must bear in mind that this is only the beginning of a long difficult process requiring a great deal more effort.

What this short sentence does prove, however, is that the signs used by the Easter Islanders are not simply 'mnemonic annotations', as was previously believed, but a fully-fledged form of writing.

According to Fisher, by organising signs employed in the past, the islanders invented their writing around 1770, when they saw a Spanish document. The evolution of Easter Island writing was abruptly interrupted in 1862, however, when almost all of the islanders were deported as slaves to Peru.



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 3 10C10C1100UUKFWANCANANANAN  
 1 10C10C1100UUKFWANCANANANANAN 2

