



Early Civilisations

Learning Objective:

To find out about the first writing systems.



NEXT



How do we find out
about the past?

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Before people invented ways of writing to record stories, facts and information, we had to rely on archaeological evidence to help us find out what life was like. The period before writing was used is called prehistory.

Archaeologists are historians who find out about the past by looking at what people have left behind. They do this by digging up objects from the ground and by looking at changes made to the ground, like the remains of buildings or city walls.

These archaeologists are excavating a site in Egypt



We can find out a lot through archaeological evidence, such as where people lived, the kind of houses and buildings they built, the food they ate, the animals they kept and the objects they made but there are lots of things archaeology alone can't tell us about the time before writing was invented.



What kind of things can't we find out about the past just from archaeological evidence?



Did you think of these ideas?

People's opinions

People's names

What laws people had
to live by

The stories
people told

What people looked like

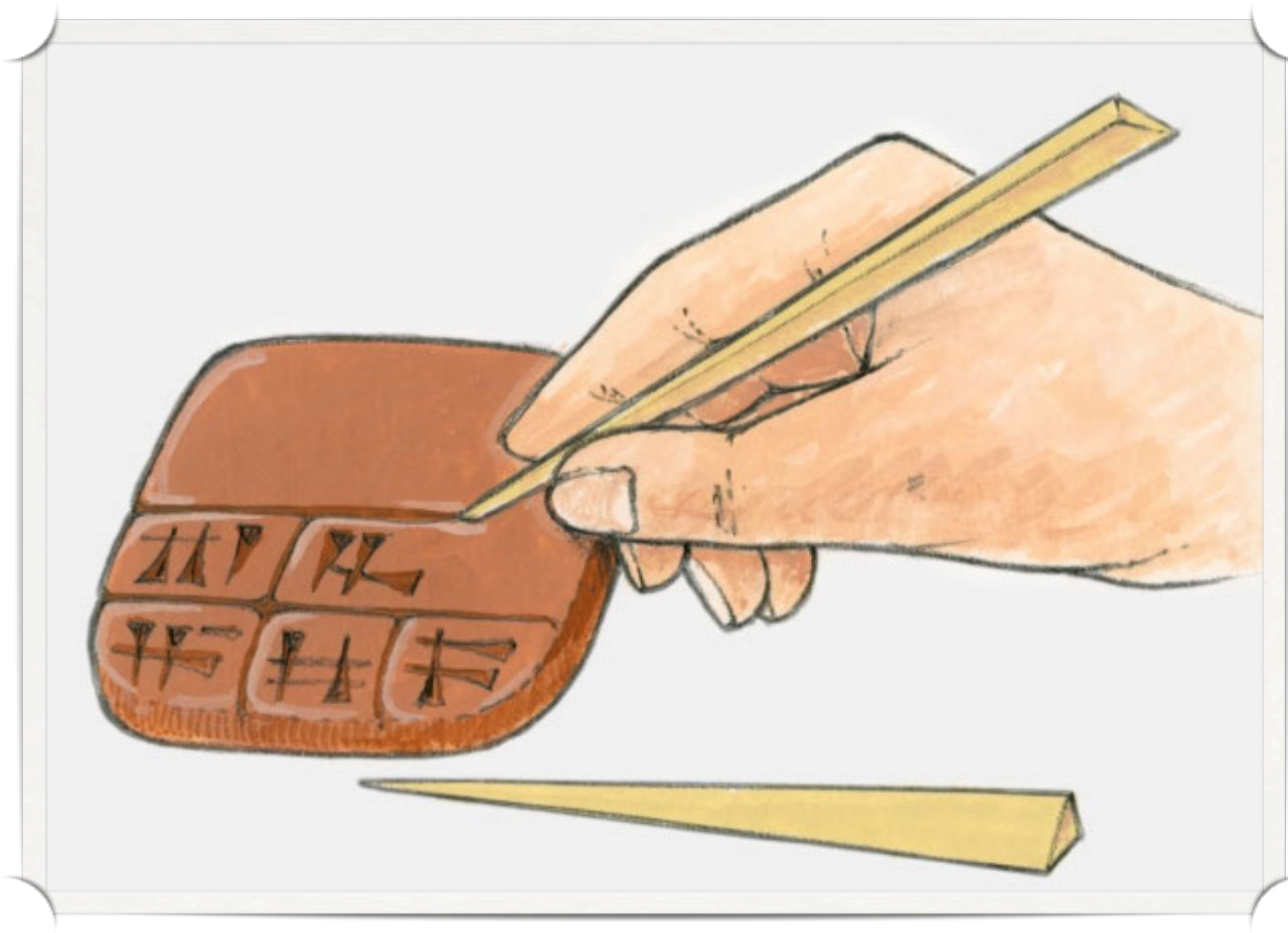
The gods people
worshipped

How society was
organised

BACK

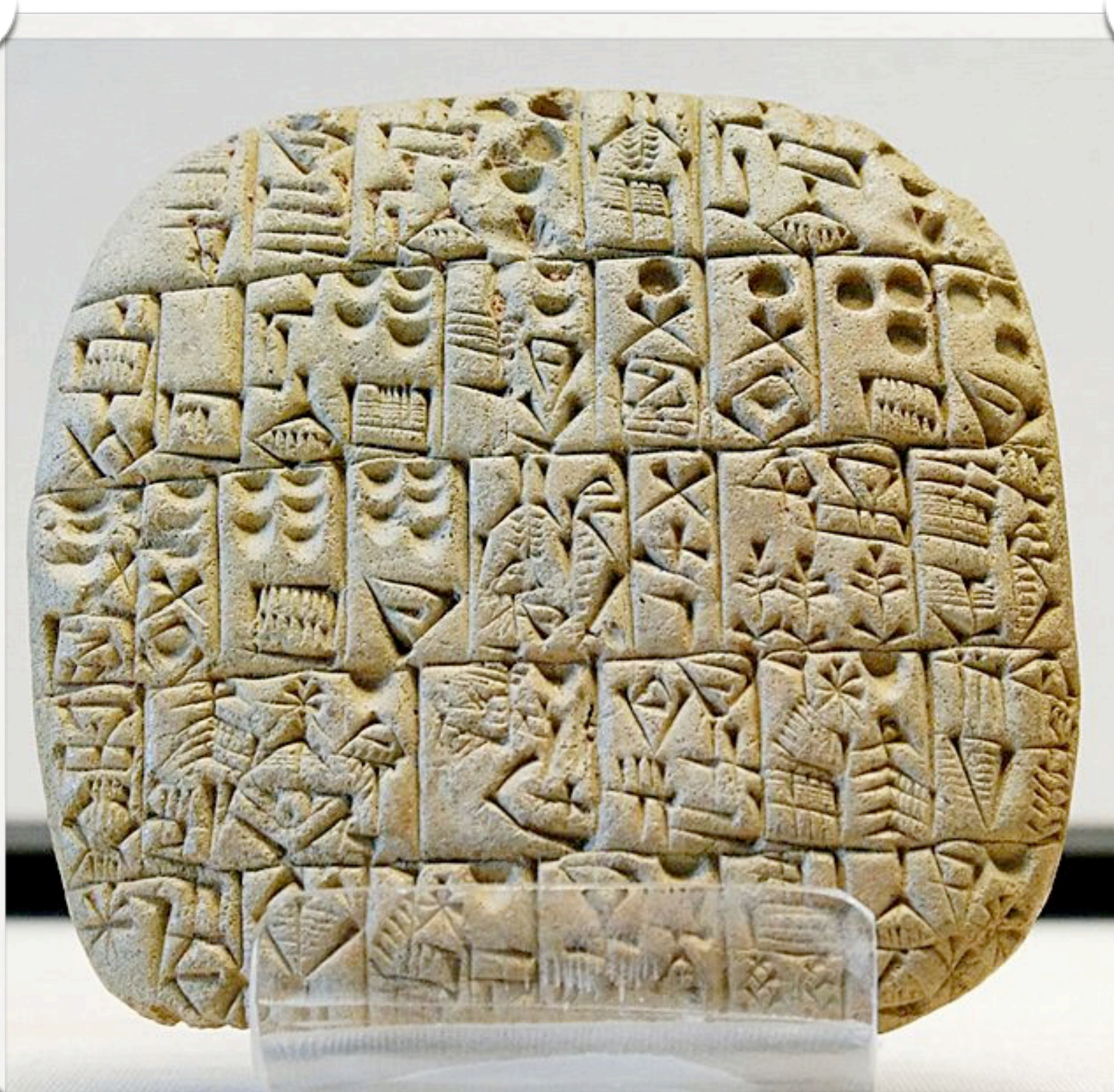
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The very first writing system in the world was invented by the Sumerians around 3300 BC. The first writing used pictures as words but over the next 200 years, these pictures became wedge-shaped symbols. This system of writing is known as cuneiform writing.



The Sumerians wrote on clay tablets using a reed called a stylus to mark the symbols into the clay. Each symbol represented a word or a sound.

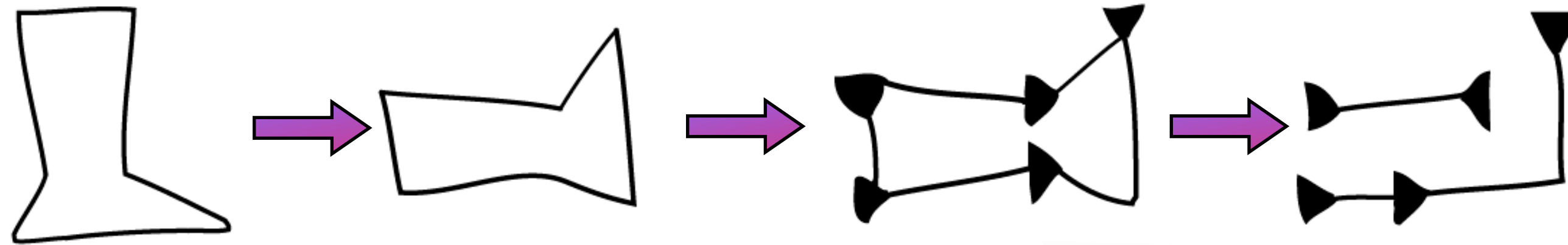
Writing was first used by the Sumerians as a way of keeping track of goods that were traded with other people. Eventually, they used writing to record stories, poems, laws and contracts.



This Sumerian clay tablet is a contract dealing with the sale of a house and a field

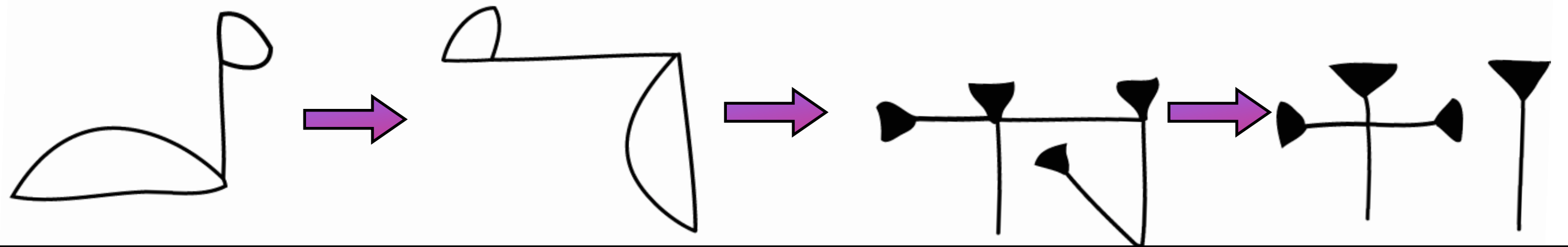


This clay tablet is a record of a song about King Ur-Namma

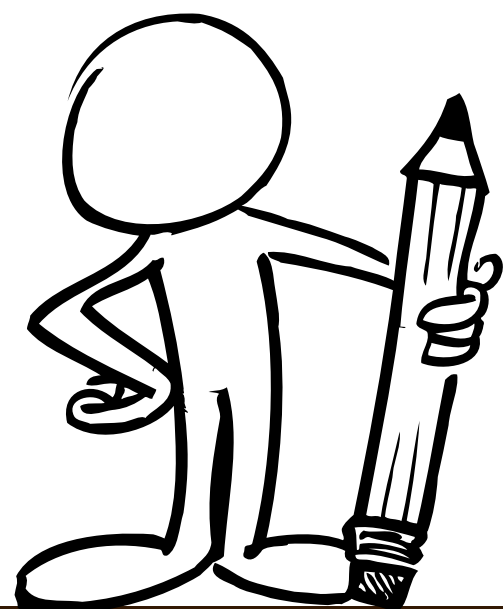
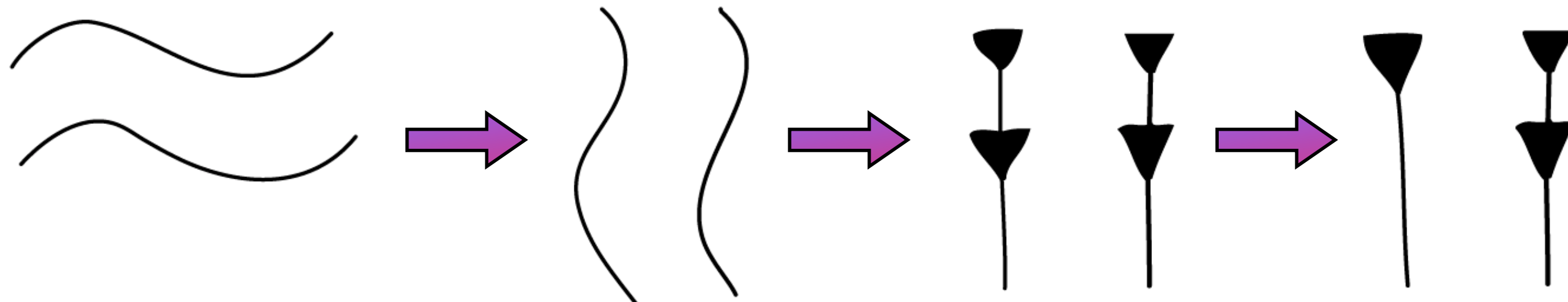


'To walk'

'Bird'



'Water'



These pictures show how cuneiform writing developed over time from pictures to symbols.

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The ancient Egyptians developed their own writing system called hieroglyphics. Early on, each hieroglyph represented a different object but, like the Sumerians, their writing soon developed so that each hieroglyph represented a sound.



By around 2600 BC, the ancient Egyptians were using papyrus to write on instead of stone. This was lighter and more convenient than writing on stone or clay. Papyrus was made from papyrus reeds that were woven together. Papyrus was the first type of paper.

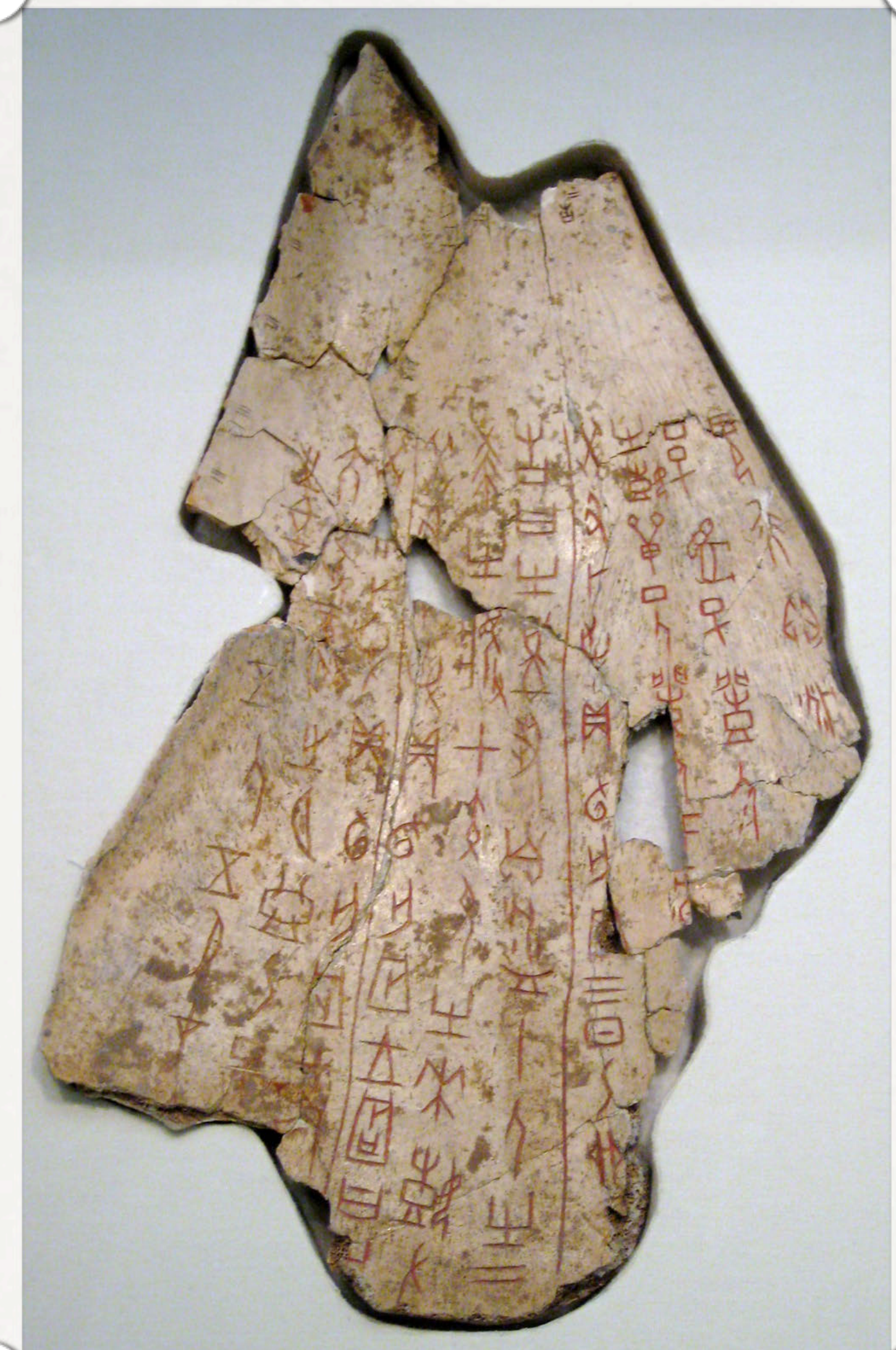


Ancient Egyptians making sheets of papyrus

Did you know that the word 'paper' comes from the word 'papyrus'?



The Shang Dynasty were the first civilisation in China to leave written records behind. They used symbols which are similar to modern Chinese writing. They wrote on bones, bamboo and silk (although only the bones survived). These bones were known as oracle bones because they were used to help kings and diviners tell the future.

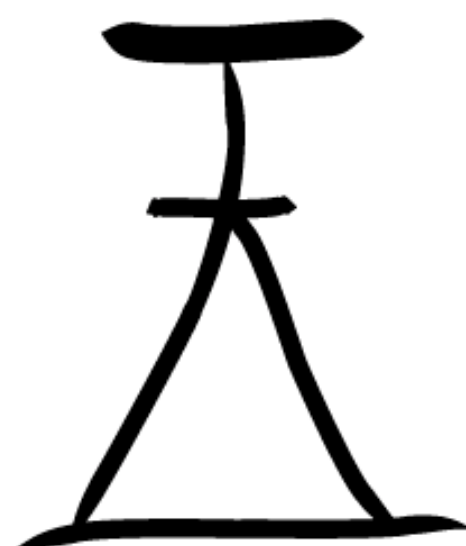




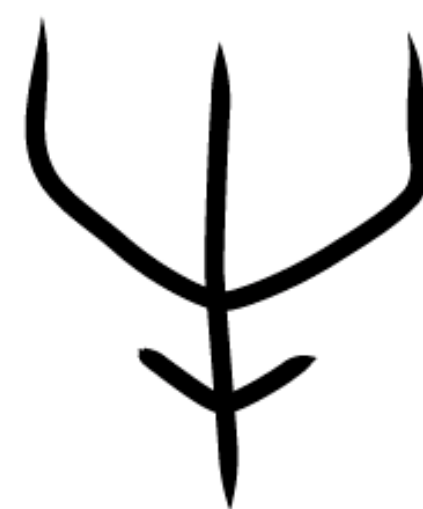
Here are some Shang Dynasty characters. Do you think they look like the word they are representing?



eye



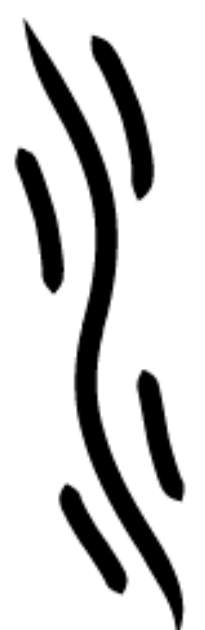
king



cow



fish



water



bird



heart



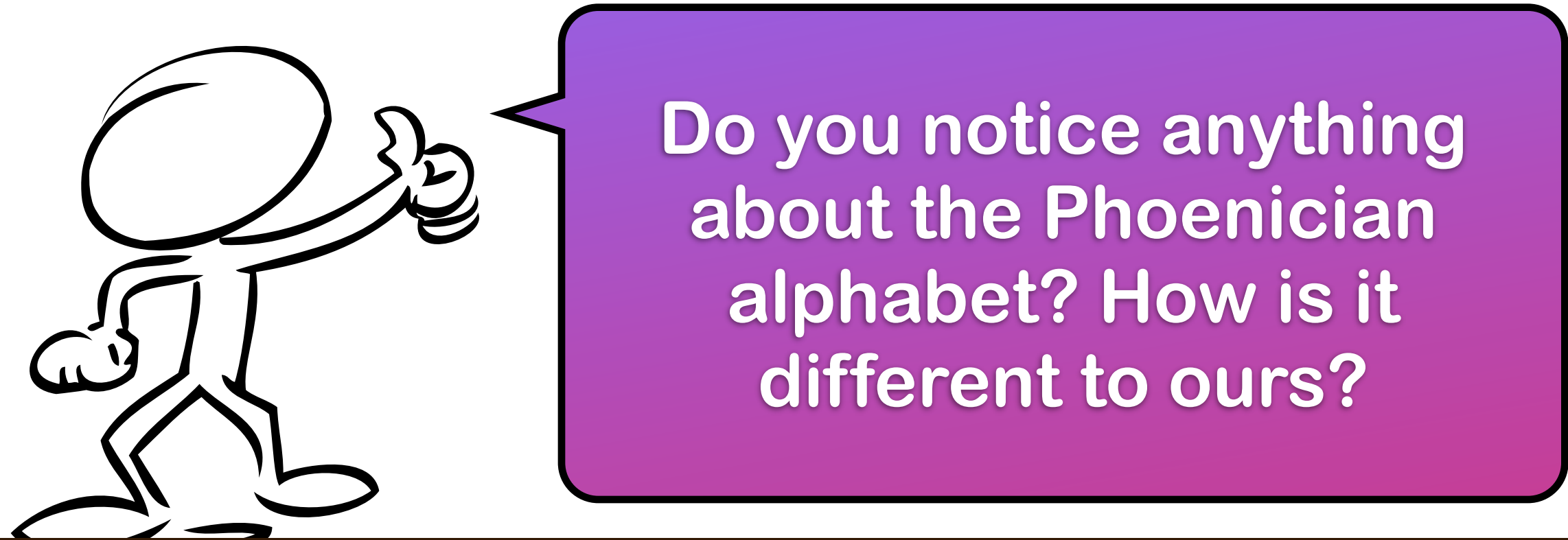
woman






















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Many other civilisations developed their own writing systems too. Most early writing systems started just like the Sumerian, Egyptian and Shang writing systems did with pictures and symbols representing words and then sounds.

The world’s very first alphabet was developed by the Phoenicians. Each letter represented a sound so that words could be made up of several letters.



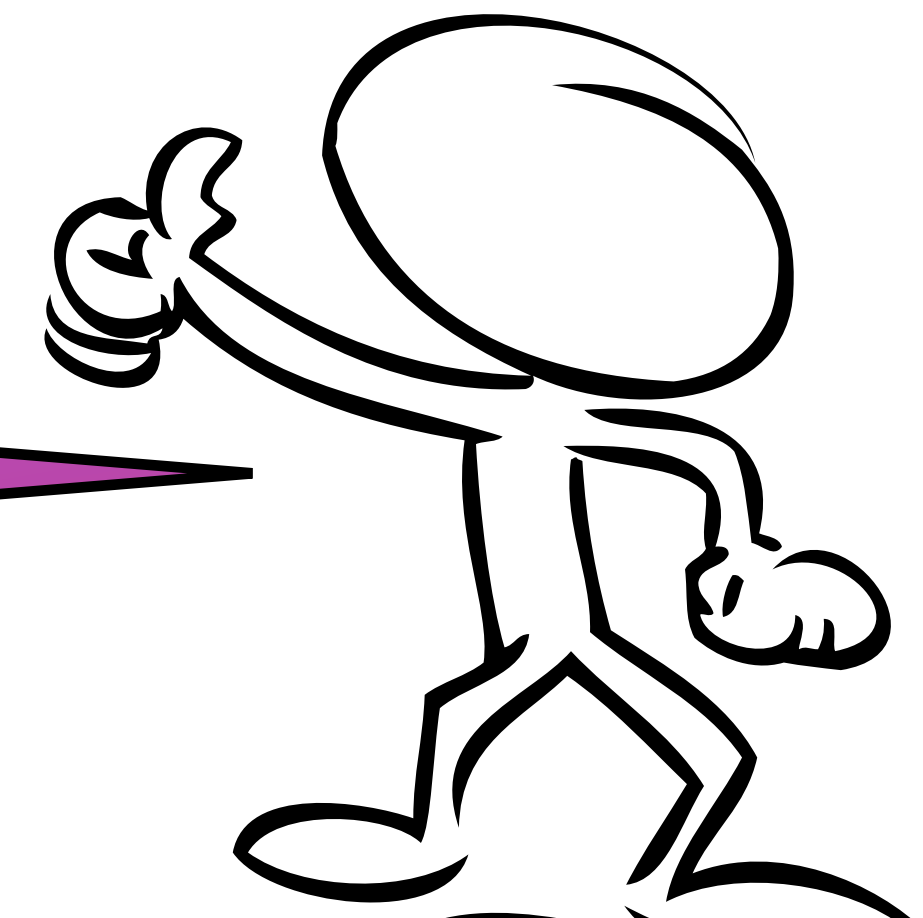
The Phoenician Alphabet							
	,		T		P		Ch
	B		Y		C		'
	G		K		Q		S
	D		L		R		Th
	H		M		Sh		Z
	W		N				

The Phoenician Alphabet

Ⲁ	ⲁ	Ⲃ	ⲃ	Ⲅ	ⲅ	Ⲇ
ⲇ	Ⲉ	ⲉ	Ⲋ	ⲋ	Ⲍ	ⲍ
Ⲏ	ⲏ	Ⲑ	ⲑ	Ⲓ	ⲓ	Ⲕ
ⲕ	Ⲍ	ⲍ	Ⲏ	ⲏ	Ⲑ	ⲑ
Ⲓ	ⲓ	Ⲕ	ⲕ	Ⲍ	ⲍ	Ⲏ
ⲏ	Ⲑ	ⲑ	Ⲓ	ⲓ	Ⲕ	ⲕ
Ⲍ	ⲍ	Ⲏ	ⲏ	Ⲑ	ⲑ	Ⲓ

The Phoenician alphabet had no vowels but it was such a successful system that it soon spread. This alphabet was to be the basis for most of the writing systems we have today. Ancient Greek, Latin, Arabic and Hebrew all came from the Phoenician alphabet.

Did you know that the Phoenicians first developed this alphabet around the year 1200 BC and that the symbols were based on Egyptian hieroglyphs?



How do you think the invention of writing has helped us find out about the past?

How do you think it changed the lives of people at the time?

