

# THE BIRTH OF WRITING

The invention of writing was so significant that it is sometimes seen as the beginning of history, as it enabled people to keep a record of events. Historians and archaeologists disagree about where writing first began, but some of the earliest evidence, from about 3300BC, was found in the Sumerian city of Uruk.

## RECORD KEEPING

In the new cities, people gave their crops to the temple, so officials needed to record who had paid what. At first they drew simple pictures, called pictographs, of all the deliveries. Circles and crescents represented numbers. This meant they could record the type and number of the goods.

## CLAY TABLETS

Most of the pictures related to farming. An ox's head was used for 'ox', while wheat ears meant 'grain'. The Sumerians wrote on blocks of damp clay using a pointed reed or stick.



*This is a clay tablet from around 3000BC, which uses pictographs to record food distribution and is probably from a temple.*

When the clay dried, the writing hardened too and the records could be kept for a long time. Some of these clay tablets survive even today.

## PICTURE WRITING

Later, other symbols were added to express more complicated ideas. For example, an ear meant 'hear'. Some ideas were made up of a combination of symbols. For example, a mouth and water placed together meant 'drink'.

Another change came when scribes started using the signs to represent short sounds as well as things. This meant several signs could be placed together to spell out a word which did not have its own picture.

It takes time to draw pictures, even simple ones. Scribes discovered that it was quicker to make simpler versions of the shapes by using the end of the writing tool as a stamp, instead of drawing with it.

