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Cuneiform Tablet

Writing started as pictographs or picture writing around 3500 to 3000 BCE. In southern Mesopotamia, the Sumerian people wrote by pressing the edge of a reed (a plant) into a soft clay "tablet." The writing was wedge-shaped as a result, and called "cuneiform." There were about 600 symbols in the Sumerian language. Writing was developed because these people wanted to identify and track the goods (including grain and other crops) that were being traded and transported.

Cuneiform was written on clay tablets. The Sumerians also drew detailed maps of their canals and reservoirs (water basins) on the clay tablets to keep records of their irrigation methods.



In ancient Egypt, hieroglyphics were pictures that stood for words and sounds. Hieroglyphics were usually written on papyrus, a plant that was pounded and dried into sheets. They were also written on stone and clay tablets. Hieroglyphics were first used to keep track of trade and taxes; then scribes (people who knew how to write and read) used them to write legal contracts, hymns to the gods (thanking them for a good harvest or the Nile's regular flooding), and to list the achievements of the Egyptian kings.



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Sickle

This is a tool used to harvest, or gather, grain. Sickles were first made of clay, after that the sharpened blades were made of stone or wood, and later they were replaced by bronze. This tool made it much easier to harvest greater amounts of grain so that it could be stored, then sold or given out during times of drought. With more grain available, not everyone had to be farmers and some could do other jobs.



Oxen, donkeys, and other animals were domesticated (or bred in captivity) for use in agriculture and transportation. They soon pulled plows and wheeled carts to transport people and goods. Large amounts of grain could be planted, harvested, and transported with the help of these animals. Gradually, animals were used for much of the work humans had done.



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Ancient Plow

Also spelled “plough,” this tool was used to break up or loosen soil and turn it over to prepare for planting. Humans pulled the first plows, but they were later pulled by animals. The plow was invented anywhere from 8000 to 5000 years ago. By 2500 BCE, people used bronze to make agricultural tools, including the plow. This made the plow more efficient because bronze was strong and did not break in the heavy soil. With the plow, humans could produce many more crops.



The shaduf, or “shadoof,” was used in Egypt (and probably in Mesopotamia) to transfer water from one place to another. The shaduf was a simple way for people to get water from the river to their fields. The tool had a wooden bucket and wooden lever system and required little human effort. It was invented between 2400 and 1500 BCE.



Potter's Wheel

The potters used these wheels, which were made of wood or stone, to “spin” containers and pottery (cups, dishes, bowls, pitchers) out of clay. After the items were finished, they were heated up in ovens to become strong. Pots and clay containers of all sizes were invented in Mesopotamia around 3500 BCE. Pottery was used to store and transport all kinds of products in the ancient world, but most importantly, water and grain. Being able to store grain allowed people to survive in case of drought or a bad harvest.

